
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL LAND PROGRAMME IN THE AUTONOMOUS TERRITORIAL UNIT OF GAGAUZIA, MOLDOVA: SOCIAL ASPECTS AND CONFLICTS

Yana Yancheva

Abstract

This article presents some basic aspects of the National Land Programme and the process of postsocialist decollectivization in Moldova. The text addresses its implementation in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. The research focuses on a crucial conflict between the president of Kolkhoz ‘*Pobeda*’ in the Gagauz village of Kopchak, on one side, and the mayor of the village and the management board of a competitive agricultural company, on the other side. The main aspect of the analysis is to study how this conflict reflects on the villagers’ lives and their attitudes towards the land reform and the kolkhoz.

Keywords: *decollectivization in Moldova, National Land Programme, land reform, Gagauzia, agricultural enterprise, cooperative*

The establishing of the kolkhoz system in Moldova during the Soviet period and subsequently its liquidation triggers a series of profound transformations in the economy, social structure and daily life of the rural communities, as well as of all nations and ethnic groups included in its boundaries. The present paper continues my research of the process of agricultural de-collectivization in Moldova and Ukraine in post-soviet context (Pimpireva, Yancheva 2012; Yancheva 2016)¹. It is the aim of this article to demonstrate how the Gagauz community and its autonomous government tackle with the National Land Programme in Moldova.

¹ The study is a part of a three-year interdisciplinary research project “Bulgarians of Bessarabia in the Post-Soviet Space – Culture, Politics, Identity”. The observations are based on fieldwork in Taraclia and Ceadr-Lunga region, Moldova in June 2009. About 30 extensive biographical and thematic interviews, discussions and observations had been carried out. The ethnic composition of the studied villages includes Bulgarians, Gagauzs (*Găgăuz*), Ukrainians, Moldovans, Russians and others.

Some words about Gagauzia²

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz: *Avtonom Territorial Bölümlüü Gagauz Yeri*; Romanian: *Unitatea Teritorială Autonomă Găgăuzia*; Russian: Автономное территориальное образование Гагаузия, shortly named in this text Gagauzia) was established on 23.12.1994 as a territorial autonomous unit of the minority of the Gagauzs in the southern part of the Republic of Moldova (Venice Commission 2002). The inaugural political event was the acceptance of the ‘Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia’ by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. Three official languages are recognized as official in Gagauzia: Romanian, Gagauz, and Russian. Regional executive and legislative institutions are: local parliament – The People’s Assembly of Gagauzia (Gagauz: *Halk Topluşu*), local governor – *bashkan* (Gagauz: *ATB Gagauz Yeri başkanı*; Romanian: *Gubernurul UTA Găgăuzia*), along with the explicit right of the three main local communities to promote their participation in Moldovan domestic and foreign policy.

According to the results of the referendum on 02.02.2014, initiated by the autonomy’s legislative body, the People’s Assembly of Gagauzia (PAG), an overwhelming majority (98.4 % of voters) chose integration with the Russia-led Customs union. In separate questions, 97.2 % voted against closer integration with the European Union and 98.9 % of voters supported Gagauzia’s right to declare independence if Moldova chooses to enter the EU. The Moldovan authority and the at-the-time Prime Minister Iurie Leanc rejected the legitimacy of the referendum as unconstitutional. However, the important thing here is the Gagauzian pro-Russian and anti-EU attitude and politics³. Mihail Formuzal, Gagauzia’s governor (*bashkan*) in 2014, explained that Gagauzian population was afraid that EU-integration programme of *Kishinev* (Romanian: *Chişinău*; Russian: Кишинёв) was masking an intention to unite Moldova with neighbouring Romania: “*The citizens of Gagauzia are very concerned that Euro-integration processes are being carried out in synch with the entry into Europe through Romania. And this worries and frightens people.*”⁴ In March 2015, Irina Vlach (or *Vlach*, *Vlah*, Russian: Ирина Влах) was elected, out of a total of nine candidates, for *Bashkan* of Gagauzia by 51% of the voters. Her foreign policy agenda is

² According to the statistical data of the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, the total population of U.T.A. Gagauzia (*Găgăuzia*) is about 162 000 in 2017. About 5.1% of its population is Bulgarians or 8013 people. http://statbank.statistica.md/pxweb/pxweb/en/20%20Populatia%20si%20procesele%20demografice/20%20Populatia%20si%20procesele%20demografice__POP010/POP010300reg.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=b2ff27d7-0b96-43c9-934b-42e1a2a9a774. Last access: November 1, 2018.

³ Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Moldova: 2017 (Document 2: Population, page 41) says that Gagauzs population in Moldova in 2014 was 126 010 or 4.5% of the whole Moldovan population. More information is available on <http://www.statistica.md/pageview.php?l=en&idc=295&id=2234>. Last access: November 1, 2018.

³ *Gagauzia Voters Reject...*, 03.02.2014; Minzarari, 05.02.2014.

⁴ Ursu, Raileanu, 02.02.2014.

to bring Gagauzia closer to Russia, unlike other candidates whose programme was Gagauzia to follow the formal pro-European politics of the Moldovan Government⁵.

The economy of Moldova after 1991

The collapse of the USSR and the proclamation of Moldova's independence in 1991 caused a sharp drop of the output and inflation. The country was affected by a sharp decline of trade production, loss of traditional markets, rift in payments and trade relation. The droughts in 1992 and 1994 and the internal war conflict in 1992 over the independence of the Transnistria region caused additional negative effects on Moldova's output. All these circumstances led to declining GDP by more than 50% between 1991 and 1994 and to peaking annual inflation at almost 2200% in 1992, following liberalization of prices and the monetization of a fiscal deficit of 26% of GDP (Haas, Mathieu, Horton, Mello, Chauffour 1999: 5–6). Seeking ways to achieve financial stabilization the authorities signed a stand-by arrangement with the International Monetary Fund in 1993. This programme brought decline of the fiscal deficit, fall the annual inflation to 24% in 1995, recovery the exports and imports.

Despite all recovery programmes and reforms, adopted by the government, the agricultural sector was still sharply affected, its production continued to decline by 11% in 1998 which is only about 60% of its level at the moment of declaring the national independence (Haas, Mathieu, Horton, Mello, Chauffour 1999: 8). Despite the collapse, agriculture continued to be the largest employer in the country (about 40% of the total employment) and agricultural production and processing in 1999 accounted about 50% of GDP (Haas, Mathieu, Horton, Mello, Chauffour 1999: 11 and 5–6).

The National Land Programme (NLP) In Moldova

Several reports of the World Bank and other documents present detailed information about the implementation of the NLP and discuss its economic effects over the life of rural population and general economy of Moldova (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998; Csaki, Lerman 2002; Muravschii 2002; Dudwick, Fock, Sedik 2007; Hammill 2014; Gorton 2001). That is why I am not presenting the whole process of NLP. Here I am interested mainly in how these documents correspond or clash with the attitudes and expectations of Gagauz people, according to my field observations in Gagauzia and South Moldova in 2009, as well as the contemporary media and internet publications, too.

World Bank Discussion Paper No398 announced that Moldova's agricultural reform started in the first quarter of 1991, more than six months before the collapse

⁵ *Эксперт: Победа Ирины Влах...*, 23.03.2015

of the USSR and the declaration of independence of Moldova⁶. But it actually began to progress after January 1996 following a decision by the Constitutional Court (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xi) which declared some restrictive provisions in the Land Code as unconstitutional. The purpose of the land reform was to transform the agricultural sector into a more productive and efficient system based on market principles and private ownership, liberalization of the market environment, privatization of agricultural production and trade, and the creation of a new institutional framework for agriculture (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xi). So in 1994 the Moldovan government started an intensive programme to break up the collective and state-owned farms (*kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses*) from the Soviet era. It is known as the National Land Programme (NLP, Romanian: *Programul național „Pământ”*, Russian: Государственная программа „Пэмынт”). It distributed agricultural land and farm property to the ex-collective members and workers, and provided formal titles to the land. The programme included a law which restructured and/or wrote off the collective and state farms’ debts (Law on Debt) to allow for the distribution of farm property. Its implementation was organizationally assisted, financially supported and monitored by the US government and its NGOs like Soros Foundation Network, World Bank (WB) and IMF, as well as from Sweden, Switzerland and Norway, and the European Union (Haas, Mathieu, Horton, Mello, Chauffour 1999: 68; Muravski 2002; Kutuzov, Andrey, Brenda R. Haskins 2003).

The main task of the reform was to eliminate the monopoly of state property on land, which was typical for the Soviet system of *sovkhoses* and *kolkhozes* for more than seven decades. As a result of the NLP in April 1998, the state held 18% of the agricultural land in Moldova, compared to 100% in 1991 (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: 1). A clear progress in the establishment of agricultural and food sector based on market principles in Moldova was reported. However, the reform was characterized by a constant struggle between counter-reform forces and pro-reform forces, which, according to the WB’s report, seriously delayed the introduction of a stable and consistent policy⁷. As a result of the liberalization of the process, privately owned agricultural land in Moldova reached 82.3% in 1998. It was spread into different kinds of corporatized collective agricultural enterprises (61.4%) such as: collective farms, joint stock societies, agricultural cooperatives, farmers associations and other corporate forms⁸ and into private land in individual cultivation

⁶ More information about the initial stage of privatization and the so called *small* (1990–1992) and *big privatization* (1994–2000) in Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: 11–14; Csaki, Lerman 2002; Gorton 2001. *Small privatization* has been justified mainly to improve the food security in a period of crisis when the formal economy has sharply contracted. In rural areas, the non-market farm production is often the largest component of the incomes of rural households (Gorton 2001).

⁷ In the period 1994–1996 Moldova was governed by the Agricultural Democratic Party, which had a great influence and dictated the restrictive policy in agriculture until 1998, when ADR didn’t win any places in the Parliament elections. ADR was the party of cooperative managers and agricultural professionals, who were opposing the reform and privatization (Gorton 2001: 16).

⁸ In this text I use the notions ‘collective agricultural enterprises’, ‘farms’ and ‘cooperatives’ as

(20.9%): peasant (individual family) farms – 7.8%; and household plots (incl. privatized gardens), which were privatized during the so called *small privatization* in 1991–1992, when vegetable gardens were divided into shares (called *sotoks*) and distributed among peasants (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: 12).

The World Bank's report makes several main conclusions. The key question is to what extent the restructuring is just on words and how real it is. In general, the large farms accomplished the restructuring in the form of property, but continued to operate in the way known from the socialist past as cooperatives, without radical restructuring towards market orientation. Most farms retained their management board and structure, which controls the core business functions. As a result, large farm cooperatives, despite their fashionably-sound corporate names, continued to accumulate losses at an alarming level. The management functions of 46–62% of the studied cooperatives are: planning and management of production, coordination of subdivisions, provision of farm services, provision of professional and administrative services, purchase of raw materials and market provision, relations with banks, labour relations. The main significant change that allowed the transition to new organizational forms is the irrevocable right of individual shareholders to leave the collective with their shares of land (*quotas and sotoks*⁹) and material assets. The sole radically new organizational forms are the farm associations, many of which operate as serving cooperatives of independent individual producers. They are only about 200 in Moldova, and represent a very small share of land and assets compared to those of other new cooperatives (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xi, 37–57, 69–91, Moroz, Ignat, Lucasenco 2014; Lerman, Sutton 2006).

To what extent have the individual peasants progressed towards taking responsibility for their rights as owners of land and material assets? The first phase of the reform was related to the distribution of paper certificates testifying the individual shares of land and assets of the old *kolkhozes*. This process of distribution was implemented by the decisions of the farms' general assemblies and according to the Land Code. But the distribution of land and the other material assets in kind was also drastically lagging behind in 2009 when I conducted my research. Lerman's team reported as a failure for the second phase of the reform the small number of individual farmers leaving the cooperatives with their land and assets to establish independent family farms and the predominance of rural residents (75%) in 1997 that still remained within the framework of the old collective farms, entrusting their land and asset shares to joint cultivation and management. 8% joined the new farms, 14% were leaving the former collectives with their shares of land and assets to establish independent family farms, and 3% leased out their land (Fig. II in Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xx). My research proves that this is/was due to the low productivity,

synonyms to present the new collective forms of agricultural enterprises.

⁹ *Quotas (kvoti)* are the shares of the privatized Soviet farms (*kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*) during the *big privatization*; and *sotoks (sotki)* are the shares of the communal/ municipal lands located closely to the settlements, prior usually used for gardens, which were never part of the big farms and were privatized during the *small privatization*.

the difficulty of finding markets (as a result of the collapse of the old Soviet market and the uncompetitiveness of Moldovan agricultural production on the European market), men's preferences to labor migration: to leave their settlements and go to work abroad (*na zarabotka*), due to the high level of unemployment and low payment, and so on (Pimpireva, Yancheva 2012; Yancheva 2016). This preference is/was therefore due to economic coercion.

NLP in Gagauzia

A main suggestion of the authors of World Bank Discussion Paper No398 is that restructuring the Soviet-style farms through dividing their land and assets into shares (*quotas*) and distributing them to individual owners (ex-collective workers and members) would result in new, more effective kind of farming, more developed production and much higher incomes for the farmers (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xi). However the World Bank's analyzers can't understand why most of the Moldovan rural communities (mainly from South and North Moldova, including Gagauzia) still preferred bounding their shares in collective agricultural enterprises. Furthermore, my research as well as the report itself observes opposing attitudes among the Gagauz community more than among any other rural community in Moldova. With their communal decisions and actions, they managed to resist (in the village of Kopchak until now) the reform as they adapted or *domesticated* it (Creed's notion).

Indeed, Georgiy Tabunshchik (Gagauz: *Tabunşçik*, Russian: Георгий Дмитриевич Табунщик), a former agronomist at the Kolkhoz '*Pobeda*' ('Victory') in the village of Kopchak (1962–1975), the first and double-term *bashkan* of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (1995–1999, 2002–2006)¹⁰, opposed against the fragmentation of the agricultural shares during his first governing. By the end of his first mandate, he did not allow Gagauzia to implement the National Land Programme „*Pământ*”, and to break down the Soviet-style of collective farming¹¹. My fieldwork in 2009 in the Gagauz village of Kopchak and the publications in the newspapers cited below show that Tabunshchik's decision was accepted with the approval of the local community.

Yet, from 1999 to 2002, Dmitriy Kroytor (Russian: Дмитрий Кройтор) became a *bashkan*, and he was the conductor of the mainstream politics of Moldovan government and introduced the National Land Programme in Gagauzia. Georgiy Tabunshchik blamed Dmitriy Kroytor that he was responsible for the demolition of the agrarian sector in the autonomous republic¹². In his defense, Kroytor pointed out that his agrarian programme in Gagauzia '*had solved the problem of the large*

¹⁰ https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A2%D0%B0%D0%B1%D1%83%D0%BD%D1%89%D0%B8%D0%BA_%D0%93%D0%B5%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%94%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87

¹¹ Дрелинский, 5.09.2007, 4–5.

¹² Табунищик..., 13.02.2015.

agrarian enterprises’ with their huge debts. He stressed that his government had implemented the National Land Programme with the intention of distributing certificates but not giving away land (as in other parts of Moldova), and preserving the large agricultural enterprises¹³. Kroytor claimed that this formula had had good results and the collective farms had been preserved in most Gagauz villages. But when Tabunshtik was elected for a *bashkan* for the second time in 2002, he actively began to pursue a policy of consolidating the land, which, according to some Gagauz analysts, has positively influenced the agricultural development¹⁴.

Tabunshtik’s double election as a *bashkan*, in my view, shows the desire of the Gagauz community to reject the national land reform. The rural communities from Gagauzia did not divide the kolkhozes’ lands and assets among few or more new collective farms or individual private farms. They restructured the old kolkhozes and sovkhozes according to the NLP prescriptions but kept these new farming forms unfragmented. That would happen with the collective decisions of all kolkhozes’ members at their General assemblies. This situation of rejection and non-acceptance of decollectivization among the rural communities in South Moldova is obvious in Lerman’s report (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: 16): Table 2.7. ‘Privatization Rate by District: 1996–1998’ shows that of 36 researched Moldovan districts, Gagauzia is on 34th place with 4.7 privatization rate and Taraclia district with predominantly Bulgarian population is on 36th place with 0.9 rate in 1998. As Mathew Gorton points out, by the end of 1999 no farms in Gagauzia had participated in the NLP due to special arrangement with ATO’s government (Gorton 2001:19).

According to the WB’s report, this slowdown had a serious impact on the entire Moldovan economy as agriculture generated more than half of the country’s GDP (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xi). However, the analysts do not understand the local population’s motivation to preserve the Soviet type collective forms, nor the psychological and cultural climate in the community itself. They argue that the restructuring of old Soviet collectives in Moldova has resulted in new forms of farming with improved productivity and higher incomes for the farmers. However, they fail to prove the claim concerning the higher incomes of the private farms compared to the incomes of the restructured collective farms, as indicators demonstrate too low rates of growth. (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xi).

The research of Lerman and his team claims that shredding old collective farms into small private family farms would make them much more successful, more efficient in production, and more profitable than the new large scale farms that, according to the authors, ‘*have just changed the sign on the door*’; which means that they have been restructured juridically by distributing shares among individuals, but they have not actually handed them over to their owners and have retained the old structures of management, organization of labour and production. As an evidence of this assertion,

¹³ Крoйтoр..., 16.02.2015.

¹⁴ A document/article written by the journalist Natalia Ustyugova in 2007, which is archived in the kolkhoz’s documentation dedicated to the 60th anniversary. I do not have information if this article was published.

the authors applied statistical results from their survey, according to which private owners reported a significantly increased profitability in grain and livestock farming compared to new collective farms, more efficient resource use, higher sales price achieved through free market mechanisms. Therefore, private farming had already proved higher efficiency than collective structures, which in turn reflected the higher family incomes and the welfare of private farmers who at the end of the twentieth century received twice as much income as the average for the country, while workers of the collective farms received below the national average. As a result of these conclusions, Lerman and his team defined workers and members of collective farms as *losers* and private farmers as *winners*. The analysis of interviews with private owners from all over Moldova, according to the authors, showed that they were happy, optimistic and relatively prosperous. This caused rural populations to leave cooperatives and strove to establish independent private farms. Lerman's report claimed that the economic decline of existing Soviet-style collective forms had provided the strongest impetus for private farming development in Moldova in 1996–1997. This is mentioned as the main motive for the establishment of private farms or for leaving the cooperatives (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xviii–xxi, 7–10, 69–90).

In this statement, however, analysts disregard an essential circumstance – the actual composition and structure of the families that determine their choice between membership in large cooperatives or separation in private family farms. My research showed that the majority of working men among Bulgarians and Gagauzs in southern Moldova had withdrawn from agriculture in search of more lucrative jobs (Pimpireva, Yancheva 2012, Yancheva 2016). This means that the majority of families who prefer to retain members and/or work in the large cooperatives are in some aspect incomplete. Young and working-age members, especially men, had found work in large cities or abroad (mainly in Russia), and Gagauz women work in Turkey as baby-sitters and nurses. Due to this reason, other family members, some men, and mostly women over the age of 50, who find it difficult to compete on the labour market in other spheres, or working people who have secure and constant jobs in the budgetary sphere, or women whose husbands have engaged in labour migration overseas, find security in membership and/or work in large cooperatives, as they can not cope alone as private farmers. Large collective farms, on the other hand, provide dividend payments in kind and offer safe, albeit low-paid jobs for those who are not competitive on the free labour market.

On the other hand, my research proves that the families in southern Moldova, who prefer to split from the big cooperatives and organize themselves in private family farms, perceived as successful by Lerman, are the ones with complete composition of their members. These are families whose farm work and entrepreneurial initiative include at least two working parents and their children, also of working age and possibly the spouses of the adult children. Very often a family farm is run by families of siblings and their working children (including in-laws and grandchildren). These farms' ability to achieve greater efficiency and profitability than the large cooperatives is explained by their ability to unite and integrate the efforts of all family members, their

labour force, and material assets. But when Lerman's team announced individual family farmers as successful and profitable, they ignored the fact that most working men and quite many women in rural communities choose better-paid, secured and more stable jobs in the cities and abroad instead of being private farmers (Pimpireva, Yancheva 2012; Yancheva 2016). This shows that the 'better indicators' in favour of private farms in the WB's report actually reflect an unsatisfactory level of incomes compared to farmers' expectations, which is also demonstrated by the report's polls: "Only half the household members report that they work full time on the family farm. Most of the others devote the rest of their working time to off-farm occupations (Fig. 6.7). (...) Among half the family members with opportunities for off-farm employment, 21% work on the local farm enterprise in a wide range of jobs (including managerial positions), and 37% work outside primary agriculture in the village or in the nearby town." (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: xix–xx, 82–83). In addition, it proves that even as private individual farms, they are united in farm associations acting as serving cooperatives, while the private farms, membering in these associations, combine cooperative efforts with individual activities (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: 88–90).

Western analysts also wonder why, at times of financial crisis and unpaid debts to creditors, workers and suppliers, the management of large cooperatives firmly refuses to resort to redundancy or 85% of managers prefer to delay payroll while their enterprises are able to pay off and 29% of them prefer to borrow to pay wages than to opt for a kind of a layoff or cut wages. "Layoffs are not regarded as an option even when the enterprise has no funds to meet the payroll. The most preferred option in such cases is simply to stop paying wages until money becomes available. Other option reported by a substantial proportion of managers includes taking credit to settle the arrears or sending some of the workers on unpaid leave (Table 4.31)" (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: 53).

The results of the 1999 WB's report and of my study in southern Moldova ten years later show that many cooperatives are late in paying salaries and/or dividends for months (even up to 12 months). Lerman and his team perceive the managers' refusal to cut labour as an irrational, ineffective, unprofitable and unreasonable solution. Approaching the situation from their position of professionals and citizens of the Western world (individualistic, rational, competitive, market-oriented and profitable), analysts do not understand that the reason for this solution lies in the perception among local people concerning the Soviet-time *kolkhozes* and their modern successors (the various types of cooperatives enterprises) as complete social institutions responsible for the care of the rural community. An elderly woman from the village of Valea Perjei said that the president of the *kolkhoz* was 'like a father of the village'. The expression of this concern is the practice introduced in the period of socialism, when the *sovkhoses* and *kolkhozes* included in their budget and their responsibilities, besides agricultural production and processing, also the care of the settlements' infrastructure, the spheres of culture, education, sports, trade, social services and even the provision of housing. The National Land Programme regulated the cessation of the modern cooperatives' responsibilities through a 1999

law (Gorton 2001) that transferred cultural activities, social services, education, sports and the care of infrastructure to the responsibility and budget of the local administrations and municipalities. However, cooperative's managements continued to feel responsible for the well-being of their members and workers, as in most of the villages their cooperatives continued to be the largest employers. This is a sense of duty and responsibility, which is caused by the traditional patriarchal relations that, although influenced by various modernist influences, continued to exist in the Moldovan rural communities among Gagauzs, Bulgarians, Moldovans and other ethnic groups (Pimpireva, Yancheva 2012; Yancheva 2016). Therefore, the actions (no matter what type) of the managements of modern cooperative enterprises and their decisions not to cut positions, despite the low profits and financial difficulties of the enterprises, are influenced to a much greater extent by the traditional relations of community solidarity and care than by the hierarchical relations between leadership and workers or by the Soviet psychological heritage. For example, cooperatives provide some services, support and care for their members disadvantaged socially or in terms of health, as well as a percentage of their food production in kind – for all their members. Therefore, the sense of social security is the main reason why the above-mentioned category of cooperative workers and members prefer to be part of these non-fragmented enterprises, despite their financial instability and the inadequate incomes instead of being autonomous into independent family farms.

Kolkhoz 'Pobeda' ('Victory')

The village of Kopchak (Romanian: *Copceac*, Gagauz: *Kırçak or Кыпчак*)¹⁵, Ceadâr-Lunga region in Gagauzia, Georgiy Tabunshtik's birth place, is a curious example of the process of privatization and decollectivization. Its population amounts to 9791 people as of September 2018¹⁶. In 2008, the Village Hall of Kopchak addressed an official request to the government that the settlement be given the statute of a town¹⁷.

Kolkhoz 'Pobeda' in the village of Kopchak was founded in September 1947 after the famine crisis. In the next two years, three more kolkhozes were created and later reunited with *Kolkhoz 'Pobeda'*¹⁸. In the 1960s it became known as 'a millionaire kolkhoz'. During the Soviet era, the kolkhoz built schools, kindergartens, hospitals, the House of Culture, a cinema, a stadium, the village street network, gas pipeline network, and managed them by its budget, which was typical of the Soviet

¹⁵ http://kopcak.moy.su/index/o_kopchake/0-81 – The official site of the Village Hall of Kopchak, which is available after registration. <https://copceac-pobeda.com/copceac/> – Information about the village on official site of *Kolkhoz 'Pobeda'*. Last access: November 1, 2018.

¹⁶ http://kopcak.moy.su/index/chislennost_naselenija/0-53

¹⁷ Стан, 19.11. 2008.

¹⁸ <https://copceac-pobeda.com/>; http://kopcak.moy.su/index/istorija_kopchaka/0-15; Стан, 19.11. 2008.

kolkhoz system. Throughout its existence until 1990, the *kolkhoz* had no debts. In 2003, according to the above mentioned requirements of the National Land Programme, all non-production (i.e. cultural, educational and social) institutions were transferred to the responsibility of the local village government.

Kolkhoz 'Pobeda' is the only one in Moldova, which preserved the statute, structure and name of the *kolkhoz* after the introduction of the National Land Programme¹⁹. Its official site does not tell when and how it was decided to maintain this statute. It is only mentioned that this happened during the term of management of Dmitriy Semyonovich Kolev (or *Semenovich*; Russian: Дмитрий Семёнович Колев) (1995–2005)²⁰. The current *kolkhoz* manager Nikolay Semyonovich Dragan (or *Semenovich*; Russian: Николай Семёнович Драган) (from 2006 until now) explains in an interview in 2008 how the decision to preserve the *kolkhoz* statute was taken: “*The year of 2000 was memorable for Kopchak's inhabitants, when the question of the inclusion of the kolkhoz to the National Programme „Pământ” was discussed with them at the general assembly*”. It was told that the *kolkhoz* would be liquidated, and small agricultural cooperatives would be set up in its place, which would be headed by new enterprising leaders. Such farms had already existed in the region, and local peasants knew their activities. Dragan says that Kopchak's inhabitants did not wish for themselves such a fate, and so all of them firmly stated, “*We will work as we are doing now.*” So 640 authorized delegates presenting 1400 *kolkhoz* members unanimously voted not to accept the the National Programme „Pământ”²¹.

Many more publications in 2007 released on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the *kolkhoz* aim to present the attitude of the local peasant community on the preservation of the large agricultural enterprise. For example, Natalia Ustyugova (Russian: Наталия Устюгова) wrote in the above mentioned document: “*The collective cultivation of land proved to them (the inhabitants of the village of Kopchak) to be the most reasonable way to manage the land. Therefore, when the republic began to fragment into thousands of small farms, the inhabitants of Kopchak decided to preserve the Kolkhoz.*” According to the author, it was precisely the preservation of the large-scale agriculture that allowed the *kolkhoz* to resist the unfavourable seasons and the economic conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union until the first decade of the 21st century. This attitude is evident in all publications, on the occasion of the *kolkhoz* anniversary, on the sites of the Village Hall and the *kolkhoz*. The pride of the local people of the *kolkhoz* preservation, as well as the pride of not allowing fragmenting and dividing the land and the production, was witnessed in my conversations with people from the village.

¹⁹ Кихайогло, 03.08.2016; Погор, 18.11.2014; Президент Республики ..., 17.09.2018; Стан, 19.11. 2008; Стариков, 12.04.2018; Яланжи, 11.03.2011 и много други.

²⁰ „*During Dmitriy Semyonovich's management (...) together with the collective farmers and the pensioners from the village the kolkhoz was preserved.*“ http://kopcak.moy.su/index/kolkhoz_quot_pobeda_quot/0-75

²¹ Дрелинский, 5.09.2007, 4–5.

In the information sources listed so far, successes of the kolkhoz are presented in detail without omitting ‘the damages’, caused by the NLP: If in 2008 in between 700 and 800 peasants from Kopchak were working in the kolkhoz, then ten years earlier 3,000 people had been working there. Despite its success in production, *Kolkhoz ‘Pobeda’* failed to provide salaries, reaching the average level for the country for its workers, and many people (though not in such extent as in other settlements) are leaving the village in search of a job²². The manager Dragan claims that the enterprise has the capacity to employ more workers, but most of the working people in the village leave it to look for work and income in other spheres.

In 2007, the kolkhoz cultivated 8,000 hectares of land and 1,000 hectares of vineyards. The livestock complex for cattle, pigs and poultry was also fully preserved. Approximately 60 cars and 100 tractors were used in the technical park, two new combines were purchased in 2008. According to Nikolay Dragan, the village was fully secured, and its own agricultural production was mainly oriented towards satisfying the local market. What made the *kolkhoz* invulnerable to the price speculation were the efforts of the management to preserve all production in the existing and the newly constructed storehouses and warehouses in order not to sell it at low and unfavourable prices. “*This allows us to sell the output when the price becomes maximum – ie. in winter and autumn. Besides, the Kolkhoz has never had credits. It manages to secure its own expenses and is able to store its produce until the autumn when it can sell it with maximum profit*”, says Nikolay Dragan in 2007²³. The milk is handed over for processing to the Milk Factory in the town of Comrat, the cheese and honey are sold mainly in the region. In 2009, the management and local government’s goal was to create processing, canning and winemaking factories of its own, while the sales of grape production had accumulated high debt (around 15 million MDL in 2008). By the beginning of 2006 all enterprises of the social sphere were transferred to the balance of the rural government, so *Kolkhoz ‘Pobeda’* was free not to spend significant funds on their maintenance.

*Kopchak and the kolkhoz ‘Pobeda’ ten years later*²⁴

In June 2009, when the project team I belonged to carried out fieldwork in the village of Kopchak, the people we interviewed were full of optimistic expectation of the future development of the *kolkhoz*, the village and their material standing. This

²² Стан, 19.11. 2008.

²³ Стан, 19.11. 2008.

²⁴ The information and the conclusions in this part of the text should not be absolutized as far as they are made by studying only materials on the Internet. With this research, I’d like to prove that the state of a community is not static, and how important it is the study to continue in time, to deepen the observations on dynamics of social relations.

can be felt by the numerous publications for the 60th anniversary of *kolkhoz* 'Pobeda' in 2007²⁵.

Ten years later, in 2017, the repercussion of the celebration of 70th anniversary of the enterprise is drowned out by disappointment and dissatisfaction, in the context of conflicts happening at local and regional levels. In the conflict I am presenting, two powerful figures (irreplaceable for the last ten years and over) are standing out: A.) Nikolay Semyonovich Dragan – the President of *Kolkhoz* 'Pobeda' since 2006, a deputy in the II, III, IV, V convocations of the the People's Assembly of Gagauzia (PAG). In the sixth convocation he was a member of the presidium and a head of the Commission of agriculture, processing industry, natural resources and ecology²⁶. It is said that he has been supported by nine (out of a total of fifteen) councilors in the Kopchak Village Council, five of whom work in the *kolkhoz*²⁷; B.) Kopchak's mayor Oleg Fyodorovich Garizan ²⁸ (Russian: *Олег Фёдорович Гаризан*), who has been in office since 1999, and from 2009 to 2014 was also a member of the PAG. The third part in the conflict is the population of the village and the shareholders (*kvotchiks*), who are also divided, supporting one of the two leaders, but to what extent are their interests protected in this conflict?

A) *Kolkhoz* 'Pobeda' and his president Nikolay Semyonovich Dragan. He held the post in 2006 with the support and patronage of Georgiy Tabunshtik, who was born in Kopchak, and Gagauzia's *bashkan* at that moment, a bastion of collective farming. He led Dragan to the management of agro-economy²⁹. The expectations for the young president in 2006 were to develop the *kolkhoz* in that unfavourable economic environment and to achieve stability and higher incomes for the *kolkhoz* workers and shareholders (*kvotchiks*), ie. almost the entire population of the village.

By 2015, in reports and Internet publications, the praises of the *kolkhoz* and its president prevailed. Local public figures point out that the pride of Kopchak was not formed neither in the era of the Russian Empire, nor in the Soviet Union, but in the 1990s, when during the NLP the *kolkhoz* management, following the will of the local population, preserved the agricultural enterprise in the form and structure of the '*kolkhoz*'. In the media, the enterprise is presented as '*the material base of the village*', '*the only agricultural enterprise in Kopchak*', '*one of the two (or the only) agricultural enterprise in Moldova that has preserved the kolkhoz form of ownership*', '*the largest agricultural enterprise in Southern Moldavia*', '*the last kolkhoz in Europe*', '*the pearl in Gagauzia's crown*', '*the largest economic agent of the region*', etc.

²⁵ В. Бизнес-Среда, № 42 (198), 19.11. 2008; в. Бизнес Молдовы, № 32 (140), 05.10.2007; в. Независимая Молдова, №118 (309), 22.08.2007.

²⁶ Вж. Досье депутата — Николай Драган.

²⁷ Вж. Кому выгоден затянувшийся земельный конфликт в Копчаке?, 26.03.2017; Членове на Селския съвет на с. Копчак.

²⁸ http://kopchak.moy.su/index/primar_s_kopchak/0-28; https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oleg_Garizan;

²⁹ Узун, 24.11.2017.

The *kolkhoz* is described as *the biggest economic agent of the region*, under the jurisdiction of which there are almost 7 thousand hectares of land and an animal farm. The land and the infrastructure belong to more than 4 thousand shareholders (*kvotchiks*) – all inhabitants of the village, many of whom worked in it all their lives. Actually, *Kolkhoz 'Pobeda'* is one of the biggest taxpayers in Gagauzia, providing 40 million lei annually to the state budget and jobs for about 500 people from the village and other settlements in Taraclia region. So Kopchak is one of the few villages where people are less engaged in labour migration, in comparison to other parts of Moldova, feeling more stability, according to some analyzes in the regional media³⁰. According to information from the local government, in 2013 *Kolkhoz 'Pobeda'* paid taxes in the amount of 553 thousand MDL for the use of agricultural land³¹. Dragan reports that in 2015 the *kolkhoz* united 4240 quota owners (*kvotchiks*) and their families, who received products in kind of about 7 million MDL³².

Published interviews with people from the village by 2015 also reflect the pride of the preserved collective form of labour and land management. But people are quite restrained in discussing the *kolkhoz* successes: “*The life in the Kolkhoz is good. Better than going to a zarabotka.*”; “*It can not be compared to the Soviet times, but we work.*” They said that everything, not just the structure, but the machines remained the same as before, there was no development from Soviet times, tractors were used over 70 years, and wages were at the minimal level for the country³³. The report by Evgenia Pogor (Romanian: *Eugenia Pogor*; Russian: *Евгения Погор*) claims that in exchange for the rented land in the *kolkhoz*, each shareholder (*kvotchik*) receives shares from the seasonal harvest on average about 450 kg of wheat per year or coupons for bread from the *kolkhoz* bakery or store. In the harvesting season, workers have free lunch in the *kolkhoz* canteen while in the rest of the year, incomes are at the minimum. On the official site of the local village government (2015), which is the main opponent of the *Kolkhoz* President, its merits are reservedly mentioned: ‘*Each family, each single person is connected with this enterprise, he feels its support at least in the fact that he has daily bread on the table.*’³⁴

In August 2015, the Moldovan government and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry reported that there would be changes in the organizational and legal form of the last Soviet-era *kolkhoz* – the one in the village of Kopchak. They must make Kopchak’s inhabitants to complete the NLP implementation and carry out the privatization of the *kolkhoz*, ie. its transformation into a cooperative enterprise. This measure is due to the fact that such an organizational and legal form as the *kolkhoz*

³⁰ Яланжи, 11.03.2011; Кому мешает колхоз „Победа“?, 18.08.2016; Узун, 24.11.2017.; Президент Республики Молдова Владимир Воронин....

³¹ Вж. Бюджет села..., 18.02.2013.

³² Николай Драган просит ..., 10.03.2015

³³ Погор, 18.11.2014.

³⁴ Вж. День работника ..., 26.11.2015.

does not exist in the law. In case that the *Kolkhoz* does not obey, the Ministry of Investments will have to liquidate the enterprise through a court decision³⁵.

The president of the *kolkhoz*, N. S. Dragan, also admits that the preserved *kolkhoz* form harms the development of the enterprise because, despite paying millions of MDL taxes, it can not receive subsidies from the government and has no access to international grants because in the law and the subsidy rules there is no such form of ownership and management as ‘a *kolkhoz*’. For example, the Farmers’ Associations Act, adopted in 2014, provides for such associations to receive large-scale grants to buy new equipment from which the *kolkhoz* cannot benefit. For this reason, N. S. Dragan asked in 2015 the government of Gagauzia to recognize the *kolkhoz* as a legal organizational form of ownership, therefore, to level it up with other agricultural enterprises. This would mean to make changes in the tariffs of compulsory social insurance contributions for such enterprises as *kolkhozes*, in whose structure agricultural production takes 90 percent or more; it would also align them with other agricultural producers. At a conference he said: “*With the coming to power of the pro-European parties in agriculture, not a single reasonable reform has been carried out. Previously, they gave money for planting new gardens and vineyards. Not anymore. Yes, they help in the acquisition of technology. But since we are a kolkhoz, we are denied this opportunity. In the Ministry of Agriculture, they say that there is no such form of ownership, they recommend reorganizing against the will of our employees. It is an absurd situation – our company annually pays out about 9 million lei (MDL) to the budget. Taxes are withdrawn from us carefully, and the kolkhoz has no right to receive subsidies. It is a paradox.*”³⁶

Nevertheless, N. S. Dragan emphasizes that the preservation of the *kolkhoz* is not the decision of the management, but of the people who want to continue the traditions³⁷. The village’s inhabitants are strongly opposed to the *kolkhoz*’s liquidation: ‘*An excellent kolkhoz, it gives grain, everything is good.*’; ‘*The Kolkhoz gives us products in kind, the Kolkhoz helps. (...) It gives grain, everything you want... Milk? The store sells it. As much as you want. Meat – please! I want to preserve the Kolkhoz.*’; ‘*Taxes are paid, people are happy, so there is no need to restructure it. They will destroy and trample it, that’s why they sell Italian milk in our store, [they say that] Moldova does not produce good products, European shit are better. Take your paws off from the Kolkhoz.*’; “*The central authorities are interested in Moldovans leaving their homes and leaving to work abroad (na zarabotka). They do not need kolkhozes that make a profit. They have another task – to sell us all under Angela*

³⁵ *Кому мешаает колхоз „Победа“?*, 18.08.2016; Кихайогло, 03.08.2016; Кандигелян..., 03.08.2016.

³⁶ *Николай Драган ...*, 10.03.2015.

³⁷ He emphasized that in the rest of the places, everything built in the Soviet era, was destroyed after the collapse of the *kolkhozes* (Pogor, 18.11.2014.); Maxim Trendafil, vice president of *Kolkhoz ‘Pobeda’*, says: ‘*The existence of Kolkhoz ‘Pobeda’ is an achievement of our people, they did not want to join the National Programme „Pământ”*. All the land in our village is cultivated simultaneously, all fields, as in Soviet times (Кихайогло, 03.08.2016.).

*Merkel and her vassals' hammer.*³⁸ In general, local people perceive the privatization process as a blow to the national agriculture and the national market, and as a betrayal of Moldovan politics in favour of the Western economy.

The regional government in Gagauzia also stands against the collapse of the *Kolkhoz*. The main position of the [Department] Management of agriculture and agrarian industrial complexes of Gagauzia is that if the land is handed over in private hands, all social programmes funded by the *Kolkhoz* will be terminated and jobs will be shortened. Its chairman Alexander Kendigelian (Gagauz: *Aleksandr Kendigeljan*; Russian: *Александр Кандигелян*), says: „*Kolkhoz 'Pobeda' is a pearl in the crown of Gagauzia as an agricultural enterprise (...) and such large productions (...) must be maintained because all the income they make is (...) for the benefit of the people who work and who live in this village*”³⁹. Thus, in 2016, a bill was signed to allow the *Kolkhoz* to receive subsidies and to have the same statute as other agrarian enterprises⁴⁰.

B) Oleg Fyodorovich Garizan (Russian: *Олег Фёдорович Гаризан*) – the mayor of *Kopchak* and ‘*Biyaz Salkim*’ SRL. After ‘*Biyaz Salkim*’ SRL (LLC)⁴¹ started its business in *Kopchak*, it began to take action to limit the *Kolkhoz* scope and activity with the support of mayor Garizan. Their activity can be traced in the Internet as far back as 2016 when the employees of the budgetary sphere in the village received the titles for their land (possibly with the mayor’s intervention) and imported their shares (80 *sotoks*⁴², *sotki*) into the new enterprise by signing a rental contract. A post in the official site of the Village Hall says: “*In 2017, for the first time in 14 years, the budgetary sphere was able to receive income from its own land.*” The enterprise paid 200 kg grain to each of the land owners in return for rented land: 100 kg corn, 60 kg barley, 60 kg sunflower. In total, the budgetary sphere received in the form of rent for the land plots in the monetary equivalent of products by more than 500,000 MDL⁴³.

The existing conflict between the mayor and the president of the *Kolkhoz* is obvious when N. S. Dragan did not allow a representative of the press office of the Village Hall to attend a *Kolkhoz* annual report meeting held on March 3, 2017⁴⁴. Five days later at the House of Culture, the company ‘*Biyaz Salkim*’ SRL held its annual report meeting with all share holders⁴⁵.

³⁸ See Кихайогло, 03.08.2016: the video and the comments; *Кандигелян...*, 03.08.2016.

³⁹ Кихайогло, 03.08.2016; *Кандигелян...*, 03.08.2016.

⁴⁰ *Депутат...*, 08.06.2016.

⁴¹ The company was registered in December 2017. <http://companies.casata.md/companies.php?l=en&action=viewcompany&id=45050>

⁴² 1 *sotok* = 1 hundred square meters.

⁴³ *Бюджетная сфера...*, 08.08.2017.

⁴⁴ *В с. Копчак прошло годовое отчетное собрание...*, 04.03.2017.

⁴⁵ All the information about the ‘*Biyaz Salkim*’s meeting in the report and the video: *Собрание квотчиков „Бияз Салкым“...*, 09.03.2017.

At this meeting the mayor explained to the owners the difference between ‘*quotas*’ and ‘*sotoks*’. In his words, ‘*quotas*’ are the arable land in the field that shareholders (*kvotchiks*) have brought to the *Kolkhoz* and it becomes *kolkhoz* land. And he defines ‘*sotoks*’ as ‘*the non-kolkhoz land, the gardens in the field; sotoks are your own land, your gardens around the village.*’ The *Kolkhoz* pays taxes on the *quotas*, and the people themselves pay taxes on the gardens in their yards and on the plots outside the village – *the sotoks*. He points out that the *sotoks* are located around the village and not in the field, so the *Kolkhoz* is not relevant to this land. It is now clear that ‘*sotoks*’ (one hundred square meters each) are the shares/plots of land that people received during the so called *small privatization* (1991–1992), which forms the so called *domestic households*, and the ‘*quotas*’ are the shares they received in the form of titles in the first stage of the *big privatization* (1994–2000) (Lerman, Csaki, Moroz 1998: 11–14). With this explanation, the mayor underlined that by supporting the ‘*Biyaz Salkim*’ SRL it was not aimed to destroy the *Kolkhoz* and that the goal of the Village Hall and the Mayor was to preserve it whole: “*We will do everything we can to keep the Kolkhoz united. This is a huge positive for all of us. It has a turnover of 6500 hrs and has the advantage.*”

At this meeting the management of ‘*Biyaz Salkim*’ SRL made a campaign for recruiting new members and tenants. It is reported that they set a goal to lease 82 *sotoks* in *Kopchak*, a land that was not in demand, which was not processed by the owners. They claimed that they offered such conditions that *Kolkhoz* ‘*Pobeda*’ did not provide: a rent equivalent to 14 kg per 1 *sotok*, or the monetary equivalent of 35 MDL per 1 row.

Meanwhile, the head of the initiative group in *Kopchak* Georgiy Petrovich Gaidarzhi (Russian: Георгий Петрович Гайдаржи), met his neighbours, many of whom work in the *Kolkhoz*. He made a list of the names and signatures of those wishing to withdraw their *sotoks* from the *Kolkhoz* and lease them to the new company. According to the press office of the Village Hall, their number was 500 peasants, who altogether with their families, accounted about 20% of the population of the village⁴⁶. However, the *Kolkhoz* management refused to meet their requests and to give up the requested *sotoks*. Therefore, the initiative group headed by Gaidarzhi addressed the local Village Council of *Kopchak* with a request to resolve that situation (20.03.2017).

This list, however, caused a conflict between the Gaidarzhi’s group and the signatories. On the official site of the Village Hall, it is said that this was a list of household plots owners (placed outside the settlement), who were wishing to obtain their

⁴⁶ There is no official data from the Village Hall about the percentage of these 500 people and their families. The information that they account for 20% of *Kopchak*’s population was mentioned by commenting on the video in https://vk.com/kopceak/news?z=video414922330_456239017%2Fbda54f26c6c2b79b57%2Fpl_post_-69200799_48421, which reflects the disapproval of the mayor’s policy: ‘*It turns out 500 houses or 2350 people, i.e. every fifth person, or 20% support. And it is not known how they were able to collect such support. There are many undercurrents. One thing is known for sure! The mayor encourages a split of the community with this issue.*’ (See: *Кому выгоден ...*, 26.03.2017.) I accept this data because they were cited in other comments too, without people denying them.

land *for their own use*⁴⁷ which is confirmed by the interviews with signatories talking about Gaidarzhi's list. In the interviews, however, they complained that later they learned they had been misled, as the list of their signatures and names, addressed to the Village Council was for transferring their *sotoks* to 'Biyaz Salki' SRL⁴⁸.

Gaidarzhi's initiative group, supported by 'Biyaz Salkim' SRL tried to arrange a meeting with the Village Council to discuss the issues '*on clarifying the areas of the household plot*' and '*on transferring land of Kopchak village*'. However, the meeting was thwarted for three times due to the absence of a quorum. Actually, the members of the Village Council, supporting N. S. Dragan, were the majority and postponed their decision for the autumn, arguing that the documents required for the legal possession of the land could not be quickly executed. The Mayor of Kopchak village Oleg Garizan stated that their decision was not in the interests of the citizens who elected them, but in the interests of a particular economic agent – the *Kolkhoz*. He often reminded that it was the only agricultural enterprise which cultivated all the available areas in Kopchak⁴⁹.

The accusations to N. S. Dragan. The mayor Oleg Garizan blamed the *Kolkhoz* management⁵⁰, that over the last ten years the enterprise was cultivating and harvesting peasants' *sotoks* illegally, without any contracts with them, and without a detailed description of their benefits in kind from the *kolkhoz* harvest. Thus it was using their land without clear conditions for the *kolkhoz*'s agreements and obligations to landowners, despite the fact that they have always paid land tax for it. On the other hand, the management does not report to the *kolkhoz* members about its property, profits from the products and the quotas, and in fact it is Dragan's personal calculations what quantity and what kind of production the *kvotchiks* would receive in kind. Thus, the management misuses many people who, due to old age, illness or absence from the village, working abroad *na zarabatka*, as a result of the economic crisis, are not able to work their land. The president N.S Dragan is demonized with names like *the local king, the master of the universe, the local feudal lord*, accusing him of working on the principle of '*The land is yours, you also pay the taxes, but the harvest is mine*', as annually assigning the harvest from people's *sotoks* amounting millions MDL without paying them rents or products in kind, so they could not take adequate advantage of their land shares.

The mayor and his administration explain that this is the reason for the owners of vegetable gardens to decide to take advantage of their right to these plots and

⁴⁷ *Некоторые представители...*, 22.03.2017.

⁴⁸ Арфонос, 25.12.2017.

⁴⁹ All about the communication between the initiative group and the village council see: *Некоторые представители...*, 22.03.2017 and the video recording, attached to it; *От „Победы“ до беды...*, 25.03.2017; *Кому выгоден...* 26.03.2017; Кысса, 23.03.2017 – video and the comments to it.

⁵⁰ All the accusations by the mayor and his supporters towards the *kolkhoz* in: *От „Победы“ до беды...*, 25.03.2017; the article is also re-published on the official site of the Village Hall: *Кому выгоден...* 26.03.2017, including the video comments; Узун, 24.11.2017; Топал, 12.12.2017; Тониогло, 03.01.2018.

to pass their plots to another economic agent represented by ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL. Dragan and the village councilors supporting him are accused in deliberately postponing the issue of transferring these *sostoks*, trying to pull the time until April 1, 2017, when according to the law all actions with the transfer of land prior renting a new crop would cease. The other accusations claim that under his leadership, the once powerful agricultural enterprise turned into a degrading and inefficient narrow profile complex. The amortization fund was destroyed, as well as the system of accountability for *kvotchiks* and a transparent decision-making process. More than 500 hectares of vineyards and gardens were abandoned and not cultivated (from 900 ha vineyards have decreased to 300 ha), the number of the *kolkhoz* workers has decreased threefold from 900 people to 300, the grain yield in 2016–2017 amounted to 25–26 centners, while the neighbouring farms harvested 60–65 c, the remaining single social object run by the *Kolkhoz* – the rural stadium – is falling apart.

The Mayor’s supporters and ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL claim that N. S. Dragan’s impunity actions have been patronized by the highest governmental level in the Gagauz autonomy. He is accused in corrupt action with the businessman Sergey Vlakh, the brother of the present *bashkan* of Gagauzia Irina Vlakh⁵¹. The main element in this relationship were the enterprises of Sergei Vlakh: ‘Demir-Agro’ and ‘Demir-Agro+’, which are the main exporters of more than 90% of *kolkhoz* ‘Pobeda’’s output. Analyzers say that the form of farming that served the social interests of the village was the key to the kickback schemes, the key beneficiaries of which are Sergey Vlach and Nikolay Dragan. So the once prosperous enterprise has become an inefficient economic unit of a narrow profile – the production of large volumes of goods for the export of a particular firm – Demir-Agro. According to unofficial statements, the *bashkan* and her clan buy from the local population more than half of the total production of agricultural products of Gagauzia for a penny. These products are then exported from the country and returned back at European prices. Thus, farmers pressed under the high taxes, the weak investment and lack of support from the authorities continue the practice to migrate and to look for livelihood abroad (*na zarabotka*). According to the media channel *The Voice of Gagauzia*, criticizing the policy of *bashkan* Vlakh and her proteges, companies owned by Sergey Vlakh have not paid more than 45 million MDL taxes to the budget of Gagauzian Autonomy for 2016. At the same time, due to the monopolistic sale of grain, these companies gained a total of about 100 million MDL that year⁵². As a result of this cooperation, the president Dragan is accused by the rumors and gossips that, while paying minimal wages to *kolkhoz* workers, he owns a house in Odessa and Sochi with video surveillance cameras, and people support him only because they are afraid of him. Also, he sells crops from unaccounted-for lands with profit of 150,000 Euro per season⁵³.

⁵¹ More about the relations between the two Vlakhs and N. S. Dragan, see: Узун, 24.11.2017; Топал, 12.12.2017; Тониогло, 03.01.2018.

⁵² Тониогло, 03.01.2018.

⁵³ *Некоторые представители...*, 22.03.2017 and the video recording, attached to it.

Meanwhile, the mayor Oleg Garizan officially blames⁵⁴ *Kolkhoz 'Pobeda'* for handling about 150 ha of land around the village belonging to the municipality of Kopchak, without paying rent for the last 15 years. He points out that the interests of the rural population have been damaged, as the budget of the municipality has not been paid for this land. Thus, the municipality annually donates the agricultural enterprise at the expense of the budget. The mayor addressed the *Kolkhoz* administration with several letters to resolve the issue, but did not receive any answer.

Dmitriy Semyenovitch Kolev – the *Kolkhoz* ex-president (1999–2006) joined those accusations against Dragan in achieving the *Kolkhoz* disintegration, while keeping much lower wages than those of neighbouring farms; in falling production volumes, in bad pricing policy as the *Kolkhoz* sells its products mainly through intermediaries at prices that are below real market prices and as well as some other blames. In August 2017, he wrote an open letter to Dragan⁵⁵, published in the official site of the Village Hall. Kolev claims that taking into account the production volumes on the *kolkhoz*, this is extremely unacceptable, since the demand for agricultural products, especially in large volumes, has always been stable. He thinks that with such failures the *Kolkhoz* could not remain competitive and offer more favourable conditions to the shareholders (*kvotchiks*) comparing to other farms that have adapted to the current market relations. So in the last ten years *Kolkhoz 'Pobeda'* existed at the expense of internal reserves, the heritage laid by previous presidents, the patience of the population, the loyalty and the support of local and central authorities.

Dragan replied Kolev's accusations⁵⁶, highlighting the successes of his administration from 2006 to 2017, the failure of Kolev's management in the period 1995–2005, when Kolev himself was forced by the first *bashkan* Georgiy Tabunshtik to withdraw from the position of the *Kolkhoz* president. Also, some reports made in support of the *Kolkhoz* and not published in the news agencies, but only in the YouTube channel of the *Kolkhoz* (*copceac-pobeda*), deny the accusations in paying low wages and highlight the role of the enterprise for the village social and cultural life. One such report⁵⁷ claims that '*the salary of an ordinary kolkhoz worker is higher than the average salary for the region*'. It is underlined that, '*unlike the other villages in Moldova, which are being left by the people to go na zarabotka, the population of Kopchak is growing and it is now more than 10,000 people*'. Also, '*the Kolkhoz pays the state treasury annually over 8 million MDL or half a million dollars.*' The report reflects N. S. Dragan's opinion that the advantage of a *kolkhoz* form of management is '*the ability to unite all industries and the large-scale production is a pledge of stability in times of crises.*

⁵⁴ He repeated his statements on various events: the meeting of 'Biyaz Salkim' SRL on March 8, 2017, a meeting of the initiative group with the local Council of the village of Kopchak in on 20.03.2017, on official website of the municipality, and the Media Agency '*The Voice of Gagauzia*' also announced them.

⁵⁵ Колев, 23.08.2017.

⁵⁶ *Ответ членов правления Колхоза „Победа“...*

⁵⁷ Стариков, 12.04.2018 г.

People of Kopchak. While both powerful men and their supporters “are fighting” on the political arena, this happens on the peasants’ backs. The media, supporting the mayor, describe people’s attitudes as follows: “*Since N. S. Dragan categorically ignores the shareholders’ demands for concluding the land lease agreements, they decided to lease their plots to another economic agent – ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL, which recently began to conclude rental agreements with them. This caused a flurry of anger of the Kolkhoz president N. S. Dragan, of the Chairman of the Village Council V. Kolioglo, who works as a lawyer at the Kolkhoz and of a number of advisers who lobby for their interests. Considering that Kolkhoz ‘Pobeda’ has long been the only economic agent in the village of Kopchak engaged in agriculture, and therefore opposes such a decision of the people. The Village Council refused the landowners to transfer their land to ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL, what provoked people to group clashes, which could turn into protest movements with unpredictable consequences, consider land users. They confirmed their readiness to go to extreme measures after April 1 (2017). (...) They also argue that, they are dissatisfied with the amount of products that the Kolkhoz management distributed in return for the land, which amount is several times less than that of neighbouring small farms. They are outraged by the fact that only the Kolkhoz management board’s supporters are invited to the reporting meetings. No one knows and can not get information about the real situation in the enterprise.*”⁵⁸ These publications claimed that people were afraid that the Kolkhoz management would postpone and avoid solving the problem until April, 1, when they would rely on the law that after this date no land can be distributed until the autumn when it comes to harvest. After April, 1, it would begin cultivating it until the next moment that allocation would be possible.

According to the media agents, supporting the mayor and ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL, some Kolkhoz farmers have begun to speculate on this wave, accusing the owners, who wanted to lease their *sotoks* to the new company, in causing the collapse of the Kolkhoz, which the villagers categorically deny. The media assumes that these outbursts into the community can only come from people interested in it.

The comments under the video reports⁵⁹ of the Village Council meetings with the Gaidarzhi’s initiative group reflect contradicting views of the local population. Some people think that the work of a second enterprise in the village would be a healthy competition. People mention that now more than 500 owners with their families (about 20% of the population of Kopchak) have already wanted to lease their lands (*sotoks*) to the new company, because otherwise shareholders lease it to the Kolkhoz for nothing. Indeed, the law affirms the right of each farmer to take his share (*quotas and sotoks/sotki*) and transfer it to another enterprise or to cultivate it on his own family farm. But in order to get their land in fact, not just in documents, the local government has to determine the position of the plots in the cadaster. In Kopchak, the mayor sympathizes with those farmers who want to withdraw their

⁵⁸ *От „Победы“ до беды...*, 25.03.2017.

⁵⁹ Кысса, 23.03.2017 – the video and the comments to it.

sotoks from the *Kolkhoz*, but the counselors who work there are opposing them. So the manager of ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL points out that if people’s demands are not satisfied, the matter will be referred to the court in order to protect their rights.

At this moment, the mayor’s voice is heard more loudly in the media because several information channels⁶⁰ support his position. Other villagers, to the contrary, say that ‘*the mayor encourages the split of the community*’ by protecting and supporting ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL. It should be noted that people’s comments shared under the publications and video reports in the internet reflect their support for the *Kolkhoz* preservation as an enterprise, a form of management and land ownership, and not for its leadership.

A video report by Leonid Arfonos is the only material on the Internet, which takes into account the position of the *kolkhoz* workers who are pleading in favour of the *Kolkhoz*⁶¹. The general opinion is that the *Kolkhoz* must be preserved in order not to fragment the land and thus to provide jobs for the young people. It is argued that ‘Biyaz Salkim’ presence and operation will not change the situation of farmers, because the amount offered for renting the *sotoks* per year is too low.

This report raises the question of the misuse of the farmers’ signatures and names. Several women explain that there were people in the village who collected signatures of the shareholders who wanted to withdraw their *sotoks* from the *kolkhoz* and cultivate them on their own. However, they wrote their surnames on empty sheets. Subsequently, people understood that these name lists were used by Gaidarzhi’s initiative group, who presented them to the Village Council as a list with the names of the people who want to transfer their *sotoks* from the *Kolkhoz* to ‘Biyaz Salkim’ SRL instead of cultivating them on their own. Here is what a woman says: “*They began to collect sotoks, from the village, from the Kolkhoz. And we wanted to give them to the Kolkhoz to work them. And I signed up for the Kolkhoz. And one day my husband came and said I had been enrolled in Salkim. I got afraid and went to talk to her: ‘Mary, you lied to me, I am an old woman.’ She told me, ‘I did not deceive you, do not worry. You signed down that you took your land from the Kolkhoz.’ And now I do not know if my lands have gone to Biyaz Salkim. I do not agree to go there, I do not want it.*” She is a retiree and receives extra income from the *Kolkhoz* – in money and in kind. “*Thanks to God, there is always something dripping from the Kolkhoz. Anyone who wants to go to work na zarabatka, let him go, but Garizan not to touch the land.*”

Here are a few responses and comments from the report: ‘*Whoever wants to give their sotoks to ‘Bias Salkim’, I will give mine to the Kolkhoz, I will do it this year,*

⁶⁰ The official site of the Village Hall (kopcak.moy.su); Information Portal of Gagauzia (gagauz.md); The Voice of Gagauzia (golosgagauzii.md); gagauzinfo.md and others.

⁶¹ Арфонос, 25.12.2017. I thank my colleague Miglena Ivanova (IEFEM–BAS) for the translation of these interviews in Gagauz language. This report is not shared on *Kolkhoz*’s official website (copceac-pobeda.com), but it is shared on its youtube profile (copceac-pobeda), with other reports by the same author. This gives reason to assume that it was commissioned by the *Kolkhoz* administration.

and I did it last year. The Kolkhoz must not be destroyed. If we destroy it, where will our children go?'; 'We have children, they need the land and sotoks to work it.'; 'Our mothers and fathers told us that we have to get on well with each other, that if there is no sympathy, things will not go on, and that the children, young people and the retired people must stay in the village.'; 'We have a tradition with the Kolkhoz and so many years we rely on it.'; 'If we are not in the Kolkhoz, we will be left without land.'; 'Let 'Bias Salkim' get out of Kopchak, let them work the land of Chimishliya (Romanian: Cimişlia, the neighbouring village). We want the Kolkhoz to be preserved.'; 'Let the Kolkhoz be preserved, we gave there our sotoks to be worked. Whoever comes to play, let him stop with his game. When Oleg Fyodorovich was a deputy, he did nothing, but now he wants to fragment the Kolkhoz. He should mind his business and take care of the people, and to abandon the idea to destroy the Kolkhoz. We are doing our job, and he should do his job as well.'; 'Haven't we given Oleg Fyodorovich to work with others ('Biyaz Salkim SRL')! Haven't they scattered the land in the other villages so they became noblemen, and the land is left uncultivated.'

The mayor Oleg Garizan is directly accused for destroying the Kolkhoz by supporting its competitors in the village: 'Garizan, let the people work normally as they used to until now. Do not lie and manipulate them, let the young people work, not to scatter the land, and not to destroy. Let everything remain in the Kolkhoz. Let it be as it was before. You want to scatter the Kolkhoz, to give the land to others but it is not clear who will benefit. People are repelled of you, Garizan.'; 'Preserve what we have now, what are the accounts? And what does our respected mayor say he will leave to generations? I appeal to you personally, Oleg Fyodorovich, the situation in the village is very bad. The Kolkhoz must be protected, and you do exactly 100% the opposite, to scatter it. Our mothers and fathers... [removed the boundaries], and now they are made again, roads divide the lands.'

Generally, there is a generalized fear that if people withdraw their land from the Kolkhoz, someone will misuse it and the payment, and somehow it will be lost. People report that they have been under pressure to pull their *sotoks* off the Kolkhoz, but they do not want to do this. All the interviewees point out that they do not want the collapse of the enterprise, because they have had good experience with it. *Kolhoz 'Pobeda'* is conceived as a heritage created by their parents and ancestors, which they are obliged to preserve. Its existence is perceived as a result of the will and efforts of all people and generations in the village. It is a heritage whose large scale is the only guarantee of the security and the economic survival of the people and the village. The *kolkhoz* form of management, the cooperative form of work, and the extensive management of the land are conceived as the ancestors' covenant and a tradition which sustains the community's integrity and the viability of the village. The security and the integrity are materialized by providing jobs for the young people and by preventing the village from being depopulated. The *Kolkhoz* is a symbol of community unity and integrity, so the narrative for its preservation and for collective work is often accompanied by a narrative for the joint and voluntary

construction of the new church, whose main sponsor is again *Kolkhoz* 'Pobeda'⁶². The fragmentation of it into several agricultural enterprises is identified with the eventual demographic disintegration of the village.

The report raises another problem that worries people. Since the mayor Oleg Garizan has provided municipal land to arrendators (possibly 'Biyaz Salkim' SRL), he has deprived the local community of municipal pastures. *'A great request, to set aside a place for pasturing, where we will be able to herd our sheep and lambs. They come and ask why you herd them here, get out of here, this is our territory.'*; *'Thousands of people live in this village, but he leaves it without pastures, which means without meat. We herded animals, and besides the budget lands, Oleg Fyodorovich allowed the lands that had never been plowed to be used.'*; People point out that after the economic changes the cows in the village have been liquidated, and with this mayor's decision, people are forced to liquidate the few remaining sheep due to lack of pastures. They recall that this deprives the community of the opportunity to produce its own milk and meat, and thus it becomes dependent on traders and foreign producers.

Some of the people interviewed want to take their land (*sotoks*) back to work it themselves, but they still support the *Kolkhoz* and disapprove the mayor's actions. *'Oleg Fyodorovich should not make arguments. And if he gets 60 people in the streets, we will get 500. And what will happen to our village? Blood will flow.'* This statement makes an association between the current conflict and the clash between the Moldovan nationalists (Mokans) and the Gagauz community in the 1990s which led to establishment of the Gagauz autonomy. The quoted man reminds the mayor that during this collision he was a child and has no recollections of its seriousness, so he is not afraid of pushing the situation to a conflict at the moment. Just as the mayor's supporters accuse the *Kolkhoz* president Dragan of misusing his position and accumulation of great wealth, the peasants accuse Oleg Garizan of the same thing. *'You ate people's work, and you are still eating it. As you scream on the TV, think about what you're doing. I have neither a car, nor a helicopter, nor an apartment in Chisinau. I live on my own land and I sleep peacefully. Think about what you are going to do to God.'*

Without questioning the credibility of the accusations against the *Kolkhoz* president N. S. Dragan on corruption and misuse, the above cited statements against the mayor Garizan provoke the suspicion that he is a policymaker, dictated by factors external to Gagauzia. I have already mentioned that the Government of Moldova, under the pressure of the World Bank and the IMF, has begun actions aiming to change the *kolkhoz* form of management, to reform it in a sort of a cooperative or a joint-stock company, like all other agricultural enterprises in the country. The reform encourages the penetration of other agricultural enterprises and family farms in the village and the transfer of agricultural land from one enterprise to another, which violates the *kolkhoz* integrity and favours its competitor's interests – 'Biyaz

⁶² Попор, 18.11.2014.

Salkim' SRL. I am provoked by the question whether peasants reminding about interethnic conflict (between Gagauzs and Moldovans) in the 1990s and associating it with the current economic conflict of influence (between local and foreign enterprises) is a hint of the pressure exerted by external and much more powerful forces over the local population and the Gagauz community as a whole. This thesis is covered in the comments cited above, which accuse the government of doing its job destroying Moldovan agriculture at the service of Western economies.

Conclusion

Kolkhoz 'Pobeda' in the village of Kopchak has not only a 7,000 hectare land asset, a multi-million-dollar infrastructure and a technical base that has been preserved since the Soviet Union, but also it has kept the form of farming – the way of life in the community, the formed psychology of collectivism among the villagers. It is this spirit of collectivism that explains residents' participation in the joint implementation of many other projects in the village: the construction of the new church, the construction of roads, sewage, street lighting, etc. These factors confirm the willingness of villagers to maintain the *kolkhoz* as a sustainable way of farming and rural development.

The *kolkhoz* is preserved with the will of the local population and the support of the Gagauz government. But the hopes of the people that preserving it would improve their lives and make them more successful, comfortable and dignified than in villages with collapsed farms, were in fact not justified. The clash in the village shows that the people in power are able to take advantage of any situation, so they always benefit, while the needs of shareholders are actually neglected.

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Assist. Professor Yana Yancheva, PhD

Institute of Ethnology and Folklore studies with Ethnographic Museum, BAS

6A Moskovska Str.

1000 Sofia

E-mail: yana.yancheva@iefem.bas.bg