

Populism, authoritarianism and agrarian struggles

A peasant perspective from Eastern Europe, in pandemic times

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I come from a long line of peasant generations from the South of Romania, as do over 4 million like me in my country. The rural population in my country represents 46% of the people who live here. Eastern Europe has a particular experience with authoritarian regimes, as we experienced both dominant political systems, living through the communism controlled by Russia and the Soviet Union and now, the capitalism controlled by Western European countries, the USA, financial institutions and the ultra rich private corporations that emerge as a power that plays by its own rules.

My organization, Eco Ruralis, is a member of Via Campesina. In Europe we are organized as the European Coordination Via Campesina. The ideology of Via Campesina can be described as progressive left, adapted region by region to the realities, the history and the culture of the peasants. This movement of peasants is building **Food Sovereignty**, a vision of how we need to build justice in farming and in food systems, starting from who takes decisions on what we produce, how we produce, for whom we produce, who benefits, while prioritizing the most vulnerable and those who work the hardest – the peasants. Food Sovereignty is essentially a **Human Right**, as La Via Campesina defines it “the right of Peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”. Via Campesina took this vision forward and worked very hard, for about two decades, to have negotiated and approved an UN Declaration for the Rights of Peasants and Other Peoples Working in Rural Areas, that defines our human rights as rural people and food sovereignty is one of them. This is one of the most progressive documents that was adopted by the UN at the highest level, before the Covid 19 pandemic hit us and things started to, let's face it, go crazy.

Agrarian struggles navigating the pandemic crisis.

The first and more visible impact was the **restrictions of access to markets** that were leading to local markets shut down. The opposition of peasants and workers was met with police violence in some cases and political ignorance generally. In the same time, governments were applying **double standards**, offering unconditional support for supermarkets, which were maintained opened during even the most restrictive times. Our governments – most of them coming from the center of the political spectrum - proved to be unable to protect the local markets and the public food systems in times of crisis.

Another concrete and painful consequence aggravated by the Covid crisis is the degradation of the rights and the work conditions of **migrant and seasonal agricultural workers**, who have been and continue to be exposed in the first line of the pandemic. This is a world wide phenomenon and in Europe, the process was facilitated through diplomatic channels, pressuring Eastern European and other poorer countries to provide migrant labor to agribusinesses in Western European countries, through cross-borders corridors that disrespected the public health measures. The Western European agriculture, which absorbs the majority of the CAP funds, is based on seasonal migrant labor exploitation, which degrades the human rights and maintains poverty in Eastern Europe and North Africa, from where the majority of these workers come.

The peasants and rural people were among the first ones to suffer from the lack of solidarity at international level between governments which is leading to more **geopolitical inequalities** – rich versus poor countries, particularly East vs West and EU vs non-EU. Another worrying effect of the Covid crisis is the deepening of the **poverty and social inequalities** due to jobs losses, market restrictions and marginalization of rural areas in public funds distribution as a response to Covid-19 crisis. Most of the public funding was distributed towards urban areas. As the crisis continues, it is unknown how far the poverty and social inequalities will go and how much the consequences will extend into the society. This phenomenon is definitely feeding the continuous rise of the extreme right.

There is a strong **social division** that cannot be ignored, generated by Covid-19 restriction measures, due to the inconsistent and contradictory communication of the governments, which have a difficult time managing the crisis. The dialogue between the rural people and the decision makers became more limited than ever. The continuous state of alert imposed by governments that have discovered new powers, has the potential to lead to the degradation of the entire **democratic process**.

In the same time, we experience the alarming acceleration of the corporate agenda on **digitalization, ultra technologization** and **international trade** seen as the only solution to overcome the crisis. These fake solutions are set to leave rural areas and small scale food producers behind. Nowadays, all public strategies speak about digitalization and so much public funding is directed towards this. In this digitalization frenzy there is no consistent debate on the ownership of the big data and what social consequences can digitalization have, as for example the digitalization of genetic information for food and agriculture leads to patents and infringes on peasants' and farmers' rights to seeds (the basis of food production).

Finally, in terms of effects of the Covid crisis, peasants suffer from the negative role played by **financial institutions** (IMF, World Bank, EBRD etc.). The financial institutions pushed for privatization of natural resources in exchange for loans to help governments respond to the Covid crisis. A clear example in Europe is Ukraine. In the early stage of the pandemic, in the spring of 2020, Ukraine was forced by the IMF to liberalize over 20 millions hectares of agricultural land, despite the public protest, in order to receive funds to support the public health system.

Wrongful appropriation of Food Sovereignty. It's simple to understand Food Sovereignty and human rights, but very complicated to apply it. Political groups from all political spectrum – from extreme right to extreme left and everything in between - understand that Food Sovereignty is a powerful and innovative concept, that speaks to the people, and they use it as a populist tool to build political power. Some are more successful than others. The extreme right is the loudest and they receive a special attention by the media. They were on the rise even before the pandemic and the past two years served them just well. But also the centered political parties dive into populist topics, hypocritically claiming that we need to protect national food producers, national interests, while they continue to serve international trade, new technologies that are inaccessible to the poor and in fact aim to make the poor poorer and eliminate peasants from agriculture.

Building a progressive leftist peasant movement in Eastern Europe. As you can imagine, it is a complicated process to build a progressive leftist peasant movement in any former Soviet country, as we go through a pandemic that feeds confusion, hysteria and social division. In Eastern Europe the extreme right is expanding its power in countries like Romania, Hungary, Poland, Belarus, and other countries. As we stand here today, the conflict on the eve of war between Ukraine and Russia threatens the entire region, with very complex implications, but certainly a conflict that has the rural people at the forefront, voiceless and completely vulnerable. As we have been talking a lot with our brothers and sisters from Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, we need to remain calm and focused on unity and on the people. As they say, if we have an open and inclusive attitude, take time to understand each others differences, we can overcome the problems from agriculture and security.

Conclusion. Painting an image where rural people are captive to populism and victims of authoritarianism, victims that are feeding off of the political hands that manage best to manipulate us, is superficial, we need to go deeper than that. We need consistent and more profound work and support from academics, scholars from the region – Especially from Eastern Europe, who take the appropriate time to understand the contexts in which we live and work, what tools we have and what tools we are developing. There is a lot of nuance in the rise of populism that leads to authoritarianism, if we simplify the reality we tend to polarize the society and we have been doing this since too long.