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Prudent Resilience of Farmers

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Prudent Resilience of Farmers

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Abstract

This paper examines the resilience of the farmers, which is defined as prudent. The adjective “prudent” stands here for virtue, for the actions that may not always be rational in an economic sense but are prudent from social and cultural sustainability and risk-management points of view. By relying on ethnographic research findings from rural Serbia and Kosovo, the paper argues that prudent resilience is almost always multisectoral, which enables farmers to manage parallel threats, amortize their negative consequences, ensure forward-looking, and at the same time maintain their ethical threshold. Prudent resilience as a virtuous practice cannot be measured, which is a trend imposed by global sustainability agendas. By measuring resilience, there is a danger of perpetuating the image of farmers as victims and not as competent and self-confident managers of risk.

Keywords: resilience, prudence, risk, farmers, self-management, Serbia, Kosovo

Résilience prudente des agriculteurs

Résumé

Cet article examine la résilience des agriculteurs, qui est définie comme prudente. L’adjectif « prudent » désigne ici la vertu, les actions qui ne sont pas toujours rationnelles au sens économique, mais qui sont prudentes du point de vue de la durabilité sociale et culturelle et de la gestion des risques. En s'appuyant sur les résultats de recherches ethnographiques menées dans les zones rurales de Serbie et du Kosovo, l'article soutient qu'une résilience prudente est presque toujours multisectorielle, ce qui permet aux agriculteurs de gérer des menaces parallèles, d'amortir leurs conséquences négatives, d'être tournés vers l'avenir et en même temps de maintenir leur seuil éthique. La résilience prudente en tant que pratique vertueuse ne peut être mesurée, ce qui est une tendance imposée par les programmes mondiaux de développement durable. En mesurant la résilience, on risque de perpétuer l’image des agriculteurs comme des victimes et non comme des gestionnaires de risques compétents et sûrs d’eux.

Mots-clés : résilience, prudence, risque, agriculteurs, autogestion, Serbie, Kosovo

1.0 Introduction

The peasant and rural development studies share one common feature. They see farmers as chronic victims of broader market relations and power imbalances. Such an assumption is grounded in the idea that farmers suffer from idiosyncratic characteristics of rural life and work in agriculture.¹ Specific occupational, cultural, and social facets influence their ethos, or so-called peasant's worldview (Redfield, 1947). Farmers' relative isolation from urban centers and markets and the cyclical nature of due jobs in agriculture contribute to their strong sense of autonomy and individualism, subordination to a group and traditional institutions and norms, religion, and sometimes to the absence of critical thinking and systematic organization of knowledge (Banfield, 1967; Buttel & Newby, 1980; Stock & Forney, 2014). The lack of political and economic organization and their relative isolation from markets and political centers, as the argument goes, impairs farmers' livelihoods. Their production and outputs also suffer from price fluctuation and frequent changes in the supply value chain that are beyond their control.

Yet despite all odds, and in particular Marxist predictions, family farms did not disappear. The United Nations acknowledge that they continue to produce a third of the world's food, and more importantly, their numbers remained quite steady in the last four decades.² What makes them so resilient?

One of the earliest prominent scholars who studied farmers' resilience and organization was Alexander Chayanov. He admired farmers' potential for self-regeneration within the complex economic systems (see Banaji, 1976). Chayanov argued that peasant economy and farms have more survivability than capitalist farms because they are not driven by profit but by the labor–consumer balance. In cases where the capitalist farm may go bankrupt, the peasant family farm may work longer hours, reduce consumption, sell its products at lower prices, and manage to survive (Thorner et al., 1986, xviii). But Chayanov was wrong not only because his theory dwelled on a Russian society exclusively and could not have been tested elsewhere. He was wrong because farmers across societies, economic systems and historical epochs are not driven only by maintaining labor-consumer balance. The span of farmers' decision-making is much larger and includes strategies when they assume more or less risks, depending on the risk premiums of the particular moment and anticipated profits and benefits.

Most recent studies of resilience are less interested in ontological (à la Chayanov) and more in the practical character of farmers' resilience in regard to their external exposures to risks (Spiegel et al., 2021). Resilience is often understood as the ability of a system, group, or individuals to recover, reorganize and evolve following external stresses and disturbances (Choptiany et al., 2015). A large body of literature, thus, interprets farmers' resilience as a managing strategy against the risks of market economy, climate change and political volatility and rarely as their inherent strength (Dixon & Stringer, 2015; Choptiany et al., 2015; Thornton & Manasfi, 2010). The scholarship

¹ In the remainder of the text, I will be using the term farmer(s), although I acknowledge that they are not a homogenous group that shares the same regional, cultural, social, and economic characteristics. Yet their core similarities—farmers utilize the land for cultivation and livestock breeding that is in the ownership or under the lease of the family household that predominantly depends on labor of family members—make the term applicable across societies. On further discussion on the typology of farmers, see Shanin, 1983; Kearney, 1996; Leeds, 1977; Macfarlane, 1979; Edelman, 2013.

² See <https://www.fao.org/3/ca7036en/ca7036en.pdf>, retrieved November 10, 2022.

distinguishes three aspects of resilience: robustness, adaptability, and transformability (see Meuwissen et al., 2019). While robustness is interpreted as the ability of a farm to endure stressful and shocking economic, political, or social events, adaptability is interpreted as the capacity to accommodate these events but without sacrificing the integral farm composition and identities of farmers. Transformability, on the other hand, implies changing the integral structure and organization of a farm and farmers as a reaction to unexpected events which make farming either impossible or an undesirable activity. To understand better the practical value and limitations of robustness, adaptability, and transformability, many studies try to assess the resilience of farmers across societies and geographical regions. Such an approach is in alliance with one of the goals of European agricultural policy set up for the coming decade, which is dedicated to improving resilience of farmers and agriculture (EU Commission, 2020). The European agricultural policy, in other words, implies that farmers are vulnerable and unable to manage the risks alone. Quantified reports about farmers' exposures to risks and their resilience strategies are becoming an important source for crafting governmental measures that should enable farmers to better cope with unforeseen futures (Choptiany et al., 2015).³

Yet, the governments' measures usually come too late when the farmers have already advanced their resilience strategies. It offers a unique opportunity to question the one-sided perception of farmers as victims and reveal that their complex realities are not and cannot be limited only to vulnerability and external exposures. Although being conceptually related, vulnerability and resilience should not be confused, and their subtle differences should be acknowledged (Cutter, 2016). Cutter (2016, p. 111) correctly notes that communities "can be highly vulnerable, but that does not mean that they lack resilience." More concretely, in self-reliant rural areas, a sense of community, strong social ties, and customary laws, combined with knowledge of disposable resources and various manual and agricultural skills, enhance resilience, although such places may be perceived as highly vulnerable (Cutter et al., 2016). Likewise, awareness of people who live in vulnerable areas is elemental for the development of adequate resilience strategies. But the problem is that there are often no meaningful analyses that would reveal, in fact, the processes and outcomes of the local resilience in such places (Cutter et al., 2016, p. 1238). Instead, vulnerability and resilience are often used interchangeably, which results in the conceptual joining of the characteristics of vulnerability (weaknesses) to those of resilience (ability to regroup and endure harsh times). If vulnerability and resilience are used interchangeably, there is a justified concern that:

governments support or agencies can maintain the status quo and the existing power structure of elites, and perpetuate the disenfranchisement of selected groups and/or communities, as they undertake actions to codify and implement actions ostensibly intended to make them become more resilient (Cutter 2016, p. 110).

Such an approach can ghettoize social groups and perpetuate their vulnerable image.

³ See SHARP tool <https://www.fao.org/in-action/sharp/sharp-tool/ru/>, and Mercy Corps tool for assessing resilience https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/Resilience%20Design%20in%20Smallholder%20Farming%20Systems%20Measurement%20Toolkit_508.pdf, Retrieved November 15 2022.

To avoid a one-sided perception of farmers as vulnerable victims, I suggest focusing on the prudent resilience of farmers. The adjective “prudent” stands here for virtue; for the actions that may not always be rational in economic sense but are prudent from social and cultural sustainability, and risk-management point of view (McCloskey, 1991).⁴

The article introduces five examples of prudent resilience: scattered land parcels, managing neighboring effects, storing crops, direct sales, and safety networks, to demonstrate that the prudent resilience of farmers is constituted of a complex net of virtues, risk management, utility, satisfaction, and social considerations that have evolved through centuries of continuous occupation in agriculture and social interactions in rural communities. The examples through which I develop the argument of prudent resilience originate from extensive ethnographic fieldwork research that I have been conducting since 2013 in rural Serbia and since 2019 in rural Kosovo. The argument is centered on the inherent strength of prudent resilience. Prudent resilience has a multisectoral capacity thanks to which it is possible to manage parallel threats, attain individual and community wellbeing, while preserving farmers’ ethical threshold. As a virtuous practice, prudent resilience cannot be measured, reported, or precisely captured in policy and scholarly reports—which is a trend imposed by the global sustainability agenda. A threat to measuring the resilience of farmers lies in perpetuating the image of farmers as victims and not as competent and self-confident managers of risk. The article argues exactly the opposite. Farmers know where they are going, and prudence makes them resilient.

2.0 Is Capitalism a Major Threat to Farmers’ Resilience?

During the last two decades, the resilience of farmers became one of the topical issues in policy and scholarship that evolved from heated debates about the effects of the capitalist economy, which is believed to make farmers more vulnerable, fragile, and exposed to greater risks. Yet, the resilience of farmers has rarely been perceived in a broader historical context, where, over time, they have experienced different difficulties and struggles and endured despite everything. Approaching the resilience of farmers holistically is, thus, necessary for a better understanding of the meaning of resilience in the past and present and its prudent navigation through various periods.

For obvious reasons, people are always concerned with the present. Lamenting about the condition of farmers usually escalates with examples of rural poverty, floods, droughts and other ecological catastrophes, significant disparities between invested labor in the product and its sale price in the trade and supply chain, health and nutrition conditions in rural areas, to name a few. Capitalism is seen as the trigger of these misfortunes. It is perceived as a threat to farmers’ resilience. The inauguration of private property (that many deny as efficient) has allegedly endangered commons across the world that are seen as one of the last strongholds of farmers’ resilience (Cottyn et al., 2022). “The rise of capitalism has instigated a radical new way of organizing land and nature by mobilizing new inputs of labour and energy to fuel the rise of labour productivity” (Cottyn et al., p. 47). Such ideas suggest that commons are not only a pattern for embedding community interests in the economy but are also, similar to Chayanov’s understanding, evidence of non-profit reasoning—opposed to capitalistic logic. Yet, history records a handful of examples from the Middle Ages where private property and commons were not competing but rather

⁴ For the same reason McCloskey describes farmers as “prudent”.

complementary property regimes in local settings.⁵ It is similar today (Bankoff, 2003; Ostrom, 1990; Acheson, 2015). Abandoning the commons but also maintaining them primarily depends on the willingness of people to assume and manage risks. “When the world was filled with danger they [farmers] prudently insured at every step. When it became less so they took a chance, and prudently gave up their open fields” (McCloskey, 1991, p. 355). For a fact, farmers have been practicing such risk assessments for the last 10,000 years.

The recent socialist past (or reality) of some countries around the world has, for less obvious reasons, rarely accounted for the misfortunes of farmers. Through state coercion, dispossession of privately owned resources and subjecting farmers to the centrally planned agricultural industry was a common practice. Private and common property became ideologically marked as competing property regimes. The abolishment of privately owned assets was seen as the main motor of just and redistributive economies that progressed through various phases of collectivization. Compulsory deliveries, for example, took on a humiliating form:

The state buys wheat, meat and other agricultural products from farmers, the state decides on the type and the amount a farmer is supposed to deliver to the state at a certain time and in a certain place, and the state determines the price of the product, not the farmer. Such delivery was, in fact, a particular type of pillage and terror of the state over farmers (Pavković, 2009, p. 283).

The state attempted to impose itself as the central manager of risks, leaving the farmers little control over their own lives. Yet, farmers have been historically striving for autonomy, and their strike has contributed to the collapse of collectivization projects and socialism in many parts of the world (Tochitch, 1959; Gaćeša, 1984; Kligman & Verdery, 2011).

As with socialism, knowledge of farmer conditions in pre-colonial countries as we go further back in the past becomes loose and rarely invoked in public and academic discussions. And it often gets informed by the accounts that largely portrayed pre-colonial farmer economies as if they were integrated into society through reciprocity and redistribution and high levels of solidarity and altruism (Polanyi, 1944; Dalton, 1969; Sahlins, 1972; Scott, 1977). Yet Popkin (1979) argued that pre-colonial farmers’ societies were societies where coercion, and not solidarity, played an important role. Such societies were socially stratified even before the implementation of the market economy because the whole set of relationships and access to resources were under the control of a patron or a landlord. Individual freedom and invention were subject to collective imperatives. “In order to maintain dyadic ties and foreclose other options, the patron is often the one who prevents the spread of literacy, forcibly keeps peasants from direct involvement in markets, and rejects innovations for raising total production if the new methods have the potential to decrease peasant dependence” (Popkin, 1979, p. 34).

⁵ Scholars point out that in medieval times, arable lands were predominantly in individual or family ownership and were not subjected to communal rights as opposed to pastures and forests that were shared by the defined community (Pavković, 2009; Macfarlane, 1979; De Keyzer & Van Onacker, 2022).

We can go further in the past to add more evidence and demonstrate that because of prudent application of strategies, virtues, and risk-management, farmers endured hard, coercive, and unpredictable times. The resilience of farmers gets its full meaning only through a holistic understanding of farmers' conditions in the past and present. By focusing on capitalism alone, the resilience of farmers may be understood primarily as a way to build a stronghold that would resist the challenges of market economy and growth. The concept of the new peasantry introduced by Van der Ploeg (2008) represents one such examples. Alternative forms of farming (organic, permaculture, agroforestry, urban farming, etc.) and food supply chains (short food supply chains and slow food chains, for example) should become constitutive of the new peasantry. Such alternatives are not only possible but necessary because, as Van der Ploeg argues, they protect the farmers' autonomy, communal access to resources, and right to work as opposed to corporatized land rights, labor, and trade that generate market and power inequalities. In other words, the concept of the new peasantry is a form of political and economic resistance, but at the same time, it is a way of enhancing their resilience.

In contrast to other epochs, one aspect makes capitalism unique, however. Intertwining all spheres of local and global life makes it an unprecedented phenomenon in the whole of human history. The last two decades have witnessed the rise of global ambition toward attaining sustainable environmental policies, industries, and agencies, which has been triggered by the abstract and systematized analyses of risks. Yet hyperproduction of sustainability analyses does not address an obvious question of whether dangers are really increasing or if we are more afraid (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983). Being a farmer presupposes more exposure to risk and weather hazards as opposed to other occupations, meaning that they understand fears and encounter them in a different way than people who do not deal with agriculture. As Douglas and Wildavsky wisely wrote, "Learning about fear ought to afford a backdoor route for understanding confidence" (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983, p. 6). Farmers do not delegate risk management to other parties. They are self-managers of risk and in charge of their livelihoods in bad and good times. Yet the social climate paradoxically favors policymakers in imposing their fears onto farmers who may not agree with their visions of risk. Farmers are expected to gradually contribute to a sustainable world and global responsibility by adopting 'metrics mentality', popular with new-wave-science, through reporting on their resilience strategies. As Kingsnorth (2022) noted:

It's time we became obsessed by numbers. We need to compare yields, compare land uses, compare the diversity and abundance of wildlife, compare emissions, erosion, pollution, costs, inputs, nutrition. ... The pattern of reality will be transformed into bits and bytes, comparisons and yields, numbers and statistics, until even novels and friendships and meadows and family meals on winter nights can be measured and compared and judged for their relative contributions to efficiency and sustainability (Kingsnorth, 2022, para. 14).

Looking at it from an historical point of view, capitalism is obviously not a threat to farmers' resilience. The real danger is, however, coming from the demand for sustainable futures, which is a transitional route to *technocratism*. It imposes never-ending quantifications of farmers' strategies, yields, footprints, gender

balance, and social and environmental impacts. By classifying their strategies and actions in ‘efficient’ or ‘inefficient’ folders, farmers will be slowly forced to abandon their prudent resilience strategies for the sake of neat and satisfying rational reports on their performances. And perhaps for the first time in history, farming will slowly be seen as a performance, not as a practice of virtue. Before it is forgotten, the paper reminds the reader about how prudent resilience evolves.

3.0 Local Condition Stirs Prudent Resilience

In general, farming is a risky occupation, but farmers’ resilience, its strengths and strategies are highly connected to the regional context and develop in accordance with specific environmental, economic and social conditions that characterize the respected region.⁶

The land is too various in its kinds, climates, conditions, declivities, aspects and histories to conform to any generalized understanding or to prosper under generalized treatment. The use of land cannot be both general and kindly [*sic*]. To treat every field, or every part of every field with the same consideration is not farming but industry (Berry, 2015, p. 35).

Likewise, some threats that farmers face are of more endogenous character than others. Plant or animal diseases, floods, or hail may cause more acute problems for the household than more general events such as economic crises, wars, or political turmoil can (see De Keyzer & Van Onacker, 2022). Even within the same county, farmers may not be equally affected by the same hazardous event. A quite interesting historical example illustrates well how one group of villages—by developing strong property institutions, enforcement of farmers’ obligations, collective cooperation and land management—lowered, and, in some respects, avoided environmental problems that were detrimental to their neighbors (De Keyzer & Van Onacker, 2022, p. 30).

Farmers’ resilience is, therefore, situational and depends on short (day-to-day farm management) and long-term (management of property, human and productive capital, and weather hazards) evaluations. Farmers from the same village who adopted the no-tillage technique, for example, have different perceptions of soil erosion than the farmers who resist it. Some farmers believe that soil erosion is the result of intensive agriculture that can be remedied by adoption of no-tillage. For other farmers, soil erosion is a natural side-effect of farming rather than something that can be controlled by human action: “Erosion is part of agriculture. Wind, fire and water are natural phenomena. If you’re hit by them, you just have to accept it. It’s always been like that and will always remain so” (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 334). Comparative studies on farmers’ resilience, thus, contain abundant evidence that farmers not only diverge in how they perceive the potentials and limitations of their own farms but also in how they manifest their resilience and ability to absorb the perturbations (Thompson, 2021; Sarrouy Kay, 2021; Mulumeoderhwa et al., 2019; Diserens et al., 2018; Darnhofer et al., 2010).

⁶ Some scholars argue that resilience studies should integrate specialized and generalized resilience strategies instead of treating them as separate categories, as is usually the case (Thompson, 2021, p. 81). First, approaching specialized and generalized resilience strategies as analytically comparable categories will leave out normative values that are constitutive of their differences. Second, methodological integration of the two strategies will entail tremendous reductionism of their varieties, motivations, time horizons, and conflicting perceptions.

Being situational makes the resilience of farmers highly undetermined because what is a threat to one can be an advantage for others. Diversification of production, for example, often promoted by the policymakers as a means for increasing resilience obviously does not meet equal aims. Different producers do not experience the same benefits of diversification in recovery from market or climate shocks (Thompson, 2021; Mulumeoderhwa et al., 2019). Likewise, strategies of income-generating and off-farm work may improve the strongholds of some farmers, and at the same time, debilitate the resilience strategies of others (Bessant, 2006, 2007; Pastusiak et al., 2017; Thompson, 2021). Seasonal rural-urban migration for work is often portrayed as a real challenge in terms of both farming and migrating. Farming skills, such as seed selection, planting techniques and household knowledge, are important for the preservation of fields; maintaining satisfactory yields and crop diversification get weakened with each extended time of migration. Gradual agricultural deskilling is seen as the most common consequence of off-farm migration (Gilles et al., 2013).⁷ Likewise, examples of policies for enhancing the resilience of farmers, such as programs for certification (Organic, Rainforest Alliance or Fairtrade) or conservation agriculture may have a modest positive impact among some, while not resulting in the enhancement of market and climate resilience among other farmers (Thompson 2021, p. 82; Heckelman et al., 2018).

Such diverse responses of farmers to similar incentives point to an inherent tension between adaptability and efficiency (Mayumi & Giampietro, 2001). Efficiency can work against adaptability and vice versa in the following sense. Even though maximization of the financial means, say through off-farm work, may be efficient from a short-term point of view, it does not necessarily lead to the financial stability of the farm in the long run, nor to its greater adaptability especially when off-farm work implies shrinking labor force, disposable knowledge, and skills necessary for keeping farm household operational. In a similar way, the techniques of adaptability of the farmers do not necessarily result in an increase in profit and general financial solvency of the farm in the long run. So, trade-offs between choices that support efficiency may go contrary to adaptability (Darnhofer et al., 2010, pp. 191–192).

Further, situational and narrowly contextual-oriented resilience does not allow farmers to influence actions and changes beyond the farm level. The poor levels of market, political, infrastructural, and social integration of the individual country are some of the reasons. For most farmers, acting beyond the farm level is extremely difficult (Thompson, 2021; Sarrouy Kay, 2021), as opposed to farmers from Western countries where their level of involvement in society is significantly stronger (Diserens et al., 2018). For most farmers, thus, accepting political-societal and natural events as given inspired manifold ways of conserving their own lives and finding strength in their identity, faith and spirituality (Sarrouy Kay, 2021, p. 243). But on the other hand, such a situation has contributed to the lack of involvement of farmers in the broader society and the low transfer of trust.⁸

Because of close observations of environmental and social conditions, farmers have grown cautious about their own sustainability. Their situational evaluations and actions have generated prudent resilience, which is individualized wisdom

⁷ Quite opposite to such a view, Kaufmann (2021) explores a rare example of Chinese rice farmers who successfully manage to maintain farming on their fields, and at the same time, regularly migrate to cities.

⁸ Distrust has made farmers cautious and wary of the State which has consequently motivated them to deal without it whenever possible. It is a well explored topic in rural literature (Lewis, 1951; Foster, 1965; Banfield, 1967; Cancian, 1961; Stavriani et al., 2014).

that springs from experience, day-to-day learning and unlearning practices, and intuition. Prudent resilience is relevant for the community of farmers on a small scale, where those practices have been embedded through shared experiences of farming and environmental conditions. It, however, cannot be relevant, replicated, quantified and applicable to heterogeneous categories of farmers across regions and environmental conditions. Prudent resilience is best displayed in small ecosystems where people and their interests are closely interconnected and dependent on each other.

4.0 Prudent Resilience: Methodological Set Up

The idea of prudent resilience of farmers emerged through systematization of my previous extensive ethnographic fieldwork research in the geographical and political space of former Yugoslavia, Serbia and Kosovo in particular, which with interruptions, has been ongoing since 2013. Even though resilience was not an exclusive subject of my research, I nevertheless touched upon the topic through a broader set of questions in over 140 semi-structured interviews with various categories of farmers.⁹ Some of the questions aimed to discover how farmers understand their sustainability; what the major risks are, and how they cope with them; how they organize their household and property in terms of production, duties and care; how they understand their role, advantages and limitations in the market and in the broader supply chain; how important community wellbeing is and what individual involvement it requires.

Another crucial research method was participant observation of farmers' daily practices, their commuting to the fields, their relations to the landscapes, and social life in the villages. It allowed me to explore deeper expressions of farmers' risk perceptions, which are not always straightforward and tangible. Farmers' risk perceptions are surely shaped by external conditions, but they are intrinsically connected and dependent on their worldviews in which autonomy and personal liberty have a profound and transformative role (see Stock & Forney, 2014; Emery, 2015; Cancian, 1961).

During the same period, I conducted over 15 in-depth interviews with local agricultural officers, agricultural engineers, journalists, and agri-business owners from Serbia and Kosovo. Their insights provided necessary contextualization and shed new light on the challenges and advantages of resilience strategies of the local farmers.

The combined research methods of semi-structured interviews with farmers and participant observation enabled me to systematize their reoccurring answers and practices related to resilience and look closely into five strategies that, during extensive fieldwork research, exemplified to be the most common and relevant for them. The scattered land parcels, managing neighboring effect, storing crops, direct sale and safety networks play an important role in farmers' understanding of life, struggles, uncertainty, and satisfaction. They have an operational value in managing their households, land and livestock, trade and community wellbeing. Given that farmers rarely singled out a particular strategy that aims

⁹ In the south-east Banat villages of Vojvodina Province in Serbia, where I conducted research between 2013 and 2017, the core of interviewed farmers cultivated 5–20 ha each, while a somewhat smaller though significant group cultivated 30–60 ha. Only a few people cultivated more than 70 ha, representing the wealthiest peasants in the respected villages. On the other hand, in villages in central and south-east Kosovo, where I have been conducting research since 2019, the core of interviewed farmers cultivated between 3–10 ha each. Only a few cultivated 15–20 ha and are considered by others better-off farmers, while farmers who cultivated more than 50 ha were rare.

to treat only one set of problems or potential hazards, I discovered that they have rather holistic perceptions of individual and community risks. Scattered land parcels, managing neighboring effect, storing crops, direct sale and safety networks as much as they address the individual situation of the farmer household, they directly and indirectly, respond to the local political, economic and environmental predicaments. In other words, the strategies spring from social and environmental interactions. The combination of needs, necessities, threats, aspirations, and vulnerabilities generates a solution-oriented quest led by the prudent maintenance of the farmers' autonomy and social order. Prudent resilience is thus always multisectoral, which enables farmers to manage parallel threats, amortize their negative consequences, and ensure their forward-looking. Before it is forgotten, the paper unfolds how prudent resilience effectively mitigates risks and attains individual and community sustainable goals.

5.0 Scattered Land Parcels

Scattering land parcels has been traditionally perceived as a good way of insurance among European farmers between the fourteenth and nineteenth century (De Keyzer & Van Onacker, 2022; McCloskey, 1991). Scattering as a way of insurance and managing weather hazards is still practiced in Serbia, Kosovo, and many other countries around the globe (see Bankoff, 2003). Population growth and atomization of big families through inheritance over past decades has also been an important reason for the continuation of the scattered land parcels in Serbia and Kosovo. I will elaborate on two other equally important reasons. First is scattering as a way to continue with locally adopted land and risk management. Second is scattering as a way to maintain farmers' distrust toward the state's plans for land consolidation and avoid an unnecessary increase in taxation that can affect farmers' sustainability.

Scattering land parcels was practiced among my core informants in Serbia who cultivated 5–20 ha each. In Kosovo, the situation is quite similar. Farmers who cultivate 3–10 ha each, but also those who cultivate up to 20 ha, are prone to keep their land parcels scattered. “My land, my responsibility,” an attitude often heard, captures behavior rationalization of the farmers who are not used to sharing the responsibility and risks for their own land. Even though scattering may face many inconveniences, such as risks of trespassing and thefts or lower yields, it also offers a compensating advantage that provides the rationale for the continuation of the practice. By scattering their fields, the interviewed farmers defend themselves against various unpredictable events. “When a farmer has, say, five land plots scattered around the village, if the hail hits, it will hit only one plot, but the other four will be unharmed” (Bojan, [Kosovo], personal communication, March 4, 2019). In such a way, farmers prudently ensure the crop from failure and weather hazards.

By working daily in the fields, farmers notice that the climate close to the ground where the crops grow can vary greatly and affect the wellbeing of the plants and their growth. Another function of scattering, thus, is to accommodate variable micro-climates and avoid frost damage that can be detrimental to the health of the plants. This has been explained in a classic, *The Climate Near the Ground*, by Rudolf Geiger. “Although the ground appeared to be level, and surveying disclosed only a gentle slope, the lowest nighttime temperatures observed on frosty nights at five places within 100 meters of each other varied as much as 4.4 degrees Celsius, on one night in July (from which one can see why pines in this stand were having trouble growing) varying from 1.9 C above freezing to 2.5 C below (frost damage begins at about -2 C)” (cited in McCloskey, 1991, p. 351). Local agricultural engineers explained to me further that, through scattering

fields and digging shallow trenches, farmers control the retention of warmth inside the soils instead of letting it disappear in the air, which happens more frequently in consolidated and open fields.

Scattering, on the other hand, has the symbolic function of maintaining the autonomy of the farmers and the distrust toward the State and its intentions. During the 1980s, former Yugoslavia, for example, initiated plans for land consolidation that emerged from a necessity to rearrange privately owned scattered land plots to enable conditions for larger land holdings and more efficient agricultural production, improvement of rural infrastructure and environmental policies. The idea began by mapping the fields and making new land plans. Yet many scholars and officials agree that the plan has never been implemented to the present day in Serbia, whereas in Kosovo, it is largely regarded as a failed policy attempt (Vasiljević et al., 2018; Action Plan on Land Consolidation, 2010). Some of the interviewed farmers emphasized their reluctance toward the land consolidation plans. They did not trust the authorities that the land they were supposed to get in compensation would be of satisfactory quality and in the preferred area, anticipating that, as a result, they would be damaged. Farmers, in other words, did not want to face the transaction risks they could not manage by themselves. Likewise, by scattering fields, farmers keep a low profile, and in such a way avoid being subjected to agricultural and environmental surveillance by the state, that can result in increased taxation and unnecessary costs that land consolidation brings along (Vasiljević et al., 2018).

6.0 Managing the Neighboring Effect

Farmers' fields have always been subjected to the "neighborhood effect" (McCloskey 1991, p. 348). Trespassing and thefts that result in the destruction of crops and grass or quarrels between neighbors are persistent issues for farmers that are sometimes of greater concern than the fluctuation of prices or weather hazards, which statistically occur less frequently in comparison to an immediate threat caused by the neighbors. Thefts and crop destruction, thus, present a significant risk (see Mulumeoderhwa et al., 2019, p. 42).

Prudent resilience displays in farmers' management of the neighboring effect and resolving standing problems. The resilient response is, by rule, multisectoral. Practices such as gleaning (crop sharing) or having a 'poor table' demonstrate well a prudent way of alleviating tensions between the farmers and trespassers, establishing social equilibrium between the better off and the poor, and waste and food loss management (Dikovic, 2016; De Keyzer & Van Onacker, 2022). In Serbia and Kosovo, the practices of gleaning and poor table is accepted as a customary way of maintaining social order in the villages by virtually all farmers regardless of their wellbeing.

Gleaning represents a practice by which, after the first harvest that belongs to the owner, private fields temporarily turn into collective property where the poor can glean the crop leftovers (Dikovic, 2016). This is same with vineyards and orchards (Pavković, 2014, p. 287). By investing *labor* in collecting leftovers, gleaning enables the poor to maintain dignity in the local moral universe. Likewise, it avoids symbolically ghettoizing the poor in the category of thieves. A slightly different practice known as the poor table was historically seen as a custom of charity for poor relief, a redistribution mechanism that equally existed during periods of crop failures but also in regular times (see De Keyzer and Van Onacker 2022, 33). By sharing food and voluntarily contributing grains to designed resources, the community of farmers was ensuring relief to the poor.

Gleaning and the poor table have a great potential for amortizing social conflicts and unrest and attaining long-term sustainability of the community and the individual landowners and the poor. Likewise, by enforcing redistributing mechanisms, both practices significantly resolve food waste and losses.

7.0 Storing Crops

Storing crops is another example of prudent resilience. It is seen as the most reliable way to maintain farmers' autonomy and financial solvency, and it is usually practiced by mid-sized farmers (20-50 ha) in Serbia and Kosovo (15-20 ha). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that farmers' autonomy and financial solvency are measured by their capacity to store their agricultural products and wait for a better price. If the capacities of storage are bigger, farmers' autonomy is greater, too. Likewise, farmers who can finance their production alone, without borrowing funds and inputs under unfavorable conditions, are in a significantly better position and able to preserve their autonomy. In everyday context, it is also a matter of dignity for the farmers "If I am not capable to buy the essentials such as seeds and fertilizers for my own money, then I should not be working the land" (Egon, [Kosovo], personal communication, October 20, 2021). Although, the trend has been initiated by better-off and mid-sized farmers in Serbia and Kosovo, in conversations with local agricultural engineers, they confirmed that expanding storage capacity has slowly become an imperative for small farmers too, but its effect can only be known in the foreseeable future.

Protecting the boundaries of farmers' autonomy by enlarging storage space and self-financed production is not a novelty and goes back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. One local farmer stressed, "The time came when all products return to and are stored in individual households, like it used to be in the past when people built storehouses (*žitnice*). Whoever can do so, will keep their wheat and corn [until the time is right]. This is what most people do" (Ištvan, [Serbia], personal communication, Jun 15, 2017).¹⁰ Although some farmers struggle more than others with external financial conditions and markets, there is a consensus among farmers that was vividly summarized by farmer Sava: "The farmer cannot be ruined. He can only have more or less" (Sava [Serbia], personal communication, February 8, 2014).

Storing crops protects farmers against the years that will be bad. But what is considered bad is hard to tell. The years with low prices, for example, are the result of good harvests when farmers usually invest in storage and keeping their grains (cf. McCloskey, 1991, p. 354). Storing crops also serves to consolidate the detrimental effects of agricultural subsidies that lower not only the price of grains but labor price as well (Bessant, 2007, p. 453). Interviewed farmers and local agricultural engineers agree that low labor price turns the available workforce in rural areas away from agriculture while forcing farmers to become more inward-looking and interested in increasing self-reliance. By storing grains, farmers, thus, enable themselves to retreat from investing (in labor,

¹⁰ *Žitnice* (pl. storehouses, derives from the noun *žito*, pl. grains) served for keeping wheat and crops in the household. The main difference between *ambar* (barns) and *žitnice* is that barns are used to store corn cobs, while *žitnice* are designed to house larger amounts of grain. They were built as floor storage, or sometimes an attic served for keeping smaller amounts of grain. Before the communist revolution in Yugoslavia, building *žitnice* was the usual practice among mid-sized and better-off peasants because they traded their products on the market. When the communist government abolished the market economy and imposed restrictive agricultural policies, this practice disappeared until 2000, when it revived again.

production, premises) and selling when they face more risks, but also to assume more risk when the risk premiums fall.

As Galtier noted, “Without both private and public storage it would be very complicated to face food security issues induced by price hikes” (Galtier, 2014, p. 12). By storing crops, farmers try to uphold their autonomy, maintain their grain consumption level, build a buffer against food shortages, and create a space for their preparation and exposure to risk.

8.0 Direct Sale

Direct sale represents one of the strongholds of farmers’ prudent resilience. In Serbia and Kosovo, a great deal of farmers’ trading activities happen in the so-called informal economy, and it involves mainly small and mid-sized farmers. Farmers in Serbia, for instance, agree that 80 % of all economic activities in the villages and neighboring areas take place on the black market.¹¹ In Serbia, for instance, there were attempts to implement measures that would curtail the unreported economy, including farmers’ trading activities. Farmers are not officially allowed to sell their homemade products such as meat, milk products, honey, fruit products, alcoholic drinks, and canned goods (*zimmica*) because of various hygiene and quality standards that the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture and other associated ministries have imposed. Yet, farmers continue to trade them at the marketplaces or from home.

Through unreported sales, farmers avoid taxes they perceive as unnecessary (VAT, state or local taxes for quality control and food inspection). Through direct sale, they also maintain regular contact with the customers, even though they often sell their produce at a lower price. Most of the trade takes place on the spot and is cash only. Internet trade slowly replaces the traditional ways of buying, as it is the fastest way of negotiating price, delivery and obtaining cash. Farmers find the Internet to be close to the ideal way of trading because it facilitates a fast, simple, and comfortable trade from home. “Today farmers can have direct contact with markets without a middleman, thanks to the Internet, but it limits them to Serbia only. Nevertheless, it all goes; literally, we can trade anything” (Mirko, [Serbia], personal communication, June 17, 2017).

A great deal of the trading practices in villages are guided by a *laissez-faire* understanding of commerce, which should be fast and direct with the least possible transaction costs and greatest gain. Likewise, the factor of living on the periphery away from cities enables farmers to organize their lives and commercial activities in an autonomous way, often contrary to existing regulations. They have been familiar and inherently dependent on the market and its impulses for a long time. For farmers, regulating their commerce means denying their freedom of commerce and limiting their entrepreneurial aspirations, but also jeopardizing their material existence. They perceive the right to trade as an integral part of their autonomy and productivist mindset.

Direct sale attains different benefits that are often not anticipated in regular circumstances. Through direct trade, farmers are less exposed to significant external risk drivers. For example, in case of high inflation, there is a low-value storage of cash. Such a disability of cash can be bridged by barter that farmers always keep as a viable and acceptable option of exchange. In such a way, they also bridge and avoid exchange destruction (often manifested through food shortages) that affects urban dwellers more severely. Farmers, thus, through the

¹¹ This information was obtained through semi-structured interviews with farmers in the period from 2013 to 2017 in the south-east Banat villages in Vojvodina Province.

supply of their home-grown food, manage to relax the existing tensions in the market and uphold their relevance in a trade chain.

9.0 Safety Networks

Safety networks are the pillars of prudent resilience. Every individual farmer and rural household, regardless of their material wellbeing and status both in Serbia and Kosovo, regard safety networks as a core value. Safety networks parallelly meet several functions. They attain the functions of care, land management, and credit.

Safety networks built through the association of family members and close friends provide a space of care, which is a strong substitute for welfare provisions. Care in such a context has a function of informal welfare that evolves spontaneously through an organized network of institutions (norms and customs) and practices that share and mitigate risks (unemployment, natural catastrophes, poverty, growing old etc.) between members of the community or family. In Serbian and Kosovo societies, the religious institutions and the community have traditionally played an important role in providing care. At the same time, the state has not been seen as a primary social protector (Čalić, 2004). The trend continued after the breakup of Yugoslavia when the turbulent transition of the state generated an increased provision of informal welfare like in other former socialist countries in Eastern Europe (Polese et al., 2014).

Care is best displayed in providing for old age. As of 1986, agricultural pension insurance became compulsory for all farmers in Serbia, but most small and mid-sized farmers I interviewed reject it. Landownership and family ties are crucial for the perception of self-care. Their decision not to contribute to compulsory pension insurance is based on available land and family resources. Farmers believe these will provide them with better care and security in the long run than the pension programs offered by the state. Investing in land instead of pension insurance is a comparably favourable option because land generates immediate revenues, and through inheritance, it also remains in the family and contributes to strengthening family ties. In Serbia, agricultural pension insurances have dramatically decreased, and since 2008, their number has shrunk from 222,986 to 142,252 in 2022, with a continuing dropping trend.¹² The fact that significant number of farmers in Serbia rejects compulsory pension despite confronting the law demonstrates the autonomy in their decision-making and enduring strength of safety networks thanks to which investing in compulsory pension insurance is interpreted as loss and nuisance.¹³

Another important role of safety networks is related to land management. In anticipation of risks, farmers and their safety networks develop strategies that are oriented toward prevention and sharing the burdens of risk (cf. Alderman & Paxson, 1992). Apart from contributing to saving (assets and money) or storing goods and food, the safety networks mitigate labor shortages and spread the effects of risk over longer time. The lack of a labor force is a chronic problem in rural Serbia and Kosovo that equally affects all categories of farmers, from small

¹² See the article “*Prepolovljen broj poljoprivrednih penzionera*” [The number of agricultural pensioners has been halved] by Jasna Petrović-Stojanović, March 21, 2023, *Politika*, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/543841/Prepolovljen-broj-poljoprivrednih-penzionera>

¹³ The article analyses the reasons that placed farmers in the category of the biggest debtors toward the state, owing over 2 billion EUR to the compulsory pension fund, which is collected debts that have not been settled for over a decade. The Ministry of Agriculture is developing a plan for writing off interest and debt rescheduling for farmers. See, <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/resenje-za-poljoprivredne-penzije-do-kraja-godine>

to big.¹⁴ Poor or unemployed people in villages usually do not want to work for the family farm. Reasons are plenty: lack of knowledge of the required work, making costly mistakes, strict family rules, surveillance by a family and distrust in the worker's labor abilities, unsuitable wages, etc. Given that it is hard to utilize external help, farmers thus, rely predominantly on their own labor and their safety networks. Strategies through which farmers and their safety network strengthen the capacity of land management are usually off-farm work and economic migration. "The development of any asset markets, including the labor market, increases the liquidity of peasants and therefore their security" (McCloskey, 1991, p. 352; Bessant, 2006, 2007). By combining family labor and off-farm work, the household raises resources for purchasing necessary machinery that alleviates the risks of depending on the external labor force and preserving farmers' autonomy.

The role of safety networks is perhaps least known in the sphere of credit. In rural areas, there are different types of credit, but all of them have one thing in common: they are based on trust transfer and maintaining social credentials. Safety networks are especially important in cases of credit to trust (*veresija*)—a customary form of delayed payment that is settled monthly, usually at the end or beginning of the month. The consequences of economic insolvency in villages affect not only those who are insolvent themselves but the wider economic community such as local grocery shops, bakeries, hair salons, restaurants, local agri-businesses and others who sell their services. Sometimes, delayed payment is not necessarily associated with low income and poverty. It is about the shortage of the means of payment. Credit is a way of not having to have cash all the time. The combination of the custom and safety networks makes people respectful of the credit to trust both on a personal and community level, which is powerfully encapsulated in the words, "If peasants look after the village, the village will look after them" (Jovan, [Serbia], personal communication, May 27, 2013). Heidt rightly argued that environmental conditions of being small, isolated, or morally homogeneous increase the moral capital of the community (Haidt 2013, pp. 337–343). The reputation of people and families, thus, represents a gold standard and a pledge for future transactions. The social capital that is built through trust, family reputation, and commitment to the community represent the main clearance parameters for allowing further crediting. In rural areas, safety networks appear as the most important and the most reliable resource for borrowing and crediting agricultural and private investments with the least overhead costs. The great majority of interviewed farmers in Kosovo and Serbia confirm that safety networks substitute bank crediting and insurance in agriculture.

Safety networks have a prominent role in mitigating risks that stem from the costs and distribution of care. Safety networks preserve land resources by employing family labor. Safety networks also display as the most reliable channel of crediting co-villagers from their daily purchases to agricultural investments. They endure the challenges of modern times thanks to relations that are based on trust.

10.0 Conclusion

Scattered land parcels, managing neighboring effect, storing crops, direct sale, and safety networks—all practiced by farmers in Kosovo and Serbia—reveal

¹⁴ In Kosovo, for instance, remittances have been seen as one of the major disruptive factors of labor supply, given that over 25 % of urban households receive remittances, whereas that number is estimated to be much higher in rural areas (PSDG, 2021).

deeper layers of resilience and its virtuousness. Farmers' strategies in mitigating risks looked at from narrow economic and state points of view are not efficient, particularly in the case of scattered fields or in case of gleaning, where, instead, a considerable amount of crops in the markets ends up in consumption; or in case of direct sale where produce is traded unreported; or in case of a safety network which substitutes formal insurance, crediting, and pensions. These strategies are rather manifestations of virtue, and prudence is their main denominator. "Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; the prudent man looks where he is going" (Catholic Church, 2000, § 1806, p. 444).

Prudent resilience strategies primarily motivated to maintain the farmers' autonomy and social order, inspire the chain of other virtues such as trust, dignity, integrity, courage, acceptance, caring, fairness, cooperation, orderliness, diligence, assertiveness, consideration, contentment, faith, patience, preparedness, responsibility, and wisdom. Resilience of farmers in everyday contexts means exactly meeting all these virtues in social and environmental interactions. They grow together in a matrix made of needs, necessities, threats, aspirations, and vulnerabilities.

Contrary to this, understanding resilience only in the narrow realm of vulnerabilities wrongly reduces farmers to victims. Such a perception tends to neglect that farmers' worldviews and social and occupational satisfaction play an important role in building self-confidence and resilient thinking (Perrin & Martin, 2021; Mugandani & Mafongoya, 2019). Bankoff rightly notes that, "Locals are rendered the powerless victims of nature and outsiders transformed into the purveyors of a knowledge that confers a certain mastery over events. Yet such images are often very far from the truth" (Bankoff, 2003, p. 181). Dominant discussions on farmers and their resilience in scholarly accounts where they are portrayed as vulnerable is one such example. Technocratically inclined modern social sciences and policymakers keep insisting on assessing farmers' resilience to determine the level of their preparedness for the future. By focusing on vulnerability—a tiny segment within a complex universe of farmers, the reports capture and perpetuate the skewed, vulnerable image of farmers.

The prudent resilience of farmers contrasts with this broadly accepted picture. Prudent resilience enlightens the farmers as engaged actors whose individual endeavors in facing internal and external challenges, including weather hazards, attain larger non-tangible sustainable goals. The inherent strength of prudent resilience springs from its multisectoral capacity, which enables prudent use of capital of all forms and parallel actions aimed at ensuring the sustainability and survivability of farm household and rural communities. The tool models for assessment of farmers' resilience, composed of narrowly defined variables for the evaluation of robustness, adaptability, and transformability, cannot capture the sophisticated and virtuous character of farmers' sustainability, and eventually help with designing solutions that can address the needs of farmers as efficiently as their own strategies. Prudent resilience cannot be measured as one has not yet found a tool for measuring virtue. Let me paraphrase Chambers (1983) here: Before it is forgotten, farmers are prudent. And they are professionals after all. They cannot afford not to be.

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