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## **Institutional Traps in the Agrarian Transformation in Russia**

### **Abstract**

This paper considers the causes and mechanisms of institutional traps in the agrarian transformation in Russia. According to the author, the institutional trap is the stable existence of ineffective norms of behaviour determined by institutional transformation which, in turn, supports the stable existence of ineffective public institutions. These include the low marketability of agrarian production, the permanent unprofitability of agricultural enterprises, low labour cost and rural poverty. Finally, the author considers the national project "Development of Agro-Industrial Complex"(AIC) and reaches a conclusion - the measures undertaken do not constitute a uniform concept of the AIC development under new economic conditions and are designed not so much at long-run development of the sector as at the solution of separate current problems, which considerably diminishes the value and efficiency of the undertaken measures.

**Keywords:** institutional traps, marketability of agrarian production, profitability of agricultural enterprises, labour cost, rural poverty, priority national projects, Russia

Institutional transformation in Russia with rather ambiguous results, in particular the so-called institutional traps, has been analysed by many prominent economists and sociologists in our country (Amosov, 2001; Alekseyev, 2002; Zaslavskaya, 2004; Nureyev, 2006; Polterovich, 1999, etc.).

Institutional traps are strong and persistent ineffective behavioural patterns. Institutional traps which threaten the economic security of the country include barter, non-payments, corruption, tax evasion, the shadow economy, etc.

The institutional traps are caused, according to the authors, by: uncoordinated changes of public institutions (Amosov, 2001); the formal, imitative character of institutional transformation, their incompleteness, low performance quality of institutions, coexistence of new constructive rules of the game with obsolete dysfunctional, destructive norms (Zaslavskaya, 2004; Kirdina, 2004; Bessonova, 1999); insufficient control over observation of the rules, unjustified borrowing of institutions from an alien cultural context (Polterovich, 1999a, 1999b); rejection of new rules of the game by certain social actors, sabotage of newly adopted rules, social anomie (Zaslavskaya, 2004); presence of shadow institutions (Nureyev, 2001; Kosals, Ryvkina, 1998; Gordon, Klopov, 2001; Zaslavskaya, 2004); conflicts between public and private interests, between the interests of different social groups (Zaslavskaya, 2004; Khanin, 2004).

D. North pointed out that institutions, not necessarily and far from always, are created to be socially effective. Institutions, or at least formal rules, are created more to serve the interests of those who are in a position to influence the formation of new rules (North, 1997: 33). The creation of a market legal framework guarantees neither the emergence of effective market institutions nor a natural selection that would lead to them; ineffective patterns of behaviour may persist (Amosov, 2001; Zaslavskaya, 2004; North, 1997; Polterovich, 1999b).

All these discrepancies lead to serious socio-economic consequences, in particular, to the quick translation of illegal practices to macro, meso- and micro levels of society, slackening the course of modernisation (Gordon, Klopov, 2001:13).

An example of such practices can be shadow, or "out-legal" by Ernando De Soto terminology, economic activity, the growth of which, in spite of the process of transition, was a surprise in Russia. During Gorbachev's restructuring the phenomenon of the shadow economy was thought to be the result of defects of the Soviet system and hoped to be overcome by economic liberalisation and introduction of private ownership. In the course of transition to the market and capitalism the shadow part of the economy was expected to diminish and its "bright" portion to increase (Kosals, Ryvkina, 1998:84). But economy shadowing also took place in the informal sector, a manifestation of which is hidden, illegal payment for work (Gordon, Klopov, 2001:219).

As a result, an institutional trap appeared: the growth of the shadow sector causes a reduction of the legal one. With the same level of public expenditure,

this means an increased tax burden on legal business, which makes the shadow activity even more attractive, and so on (Nureyev, 2006).

According to V. M. Polterovich, there are at least three main mechanisms and their three effects perpetuating ineffective norms of behaviour: the "effect of learning" (ineffective norm of behaviour is perfected); "effect of linkage" (ineffective norm finds its place in the system of other norms, is linked with them); "effect of cultural inertia" (ineffective norm is perceived as ordinary and expected ) (Polterovich, 1999b)

*The institutional trap, in our understanding, is the stable existence of ineffective norms of behaviour conditioned by institutional transformation which, in turn, supports the stable existence of ineffective public institutions.*

### **The Trap of the Small Commodity Character of Agrarian Production: Backwardness Instead of Modernisation**

One of the unexpected results of the agrarian reform, the main idea of which was to be the creation of an efficient private sector on the basis of peasant farms was the growth of production on small household plots. This phenomenon can be viewed from a different angle.

Many native and foreign authors see the expansion of production on household plots as being beneficial for the country and for the population. The supporters of this viewpoint believe that this is just the Russian track to a bright capitalist future, the transition from collective socialist economy to private capitalist management, to the all-round revival of the peasant structure (O'Brien, 2002; Patsiorkovskii, 2003; Lerman, 2002; Yamamura, 2002, etc.)

It was due to a considerable (over a third) increase in agricultural output on individual household plots that it was possible to avoid famine in the country and maintain public order. But at what price? Before the reorganisation of collective farms in the early 1990s household farming was mainly a sphere of secondary employment of families along with the primary employment in the public sphere of agricultural production. Under conditions of reformation of agrarian relations and the collapse of collective-state agriculture, the role of the household plot as a basic source of food and additional income of rural people has increased considerably.

According to statistical data, in 2003 16.0 million families in Russia had household plots in a total area of 7.0 million ha, or 0.44 ha per family. Apart from that, 14.5 million families had plots in collective and individual gardens in



a total area of 1.3 million ha, or 0.09 ha per household. Collective kitchen gardens in a total area of 0.4 million ha were used by 4.3 million families. That was 0.1 ha per household. Household plots along with agricultural enterprises, are currently the leading sector of the agrarian economy. During the years of reform their proportion in the national agricultural output increased more than 1.5 times to 51% in 2004 (RF Goskomstat, 2005a: 210, 213).

Legislative and economic prerequisites have now appeared for the development of household farming as an equal form of agricultural production and for their possible transformation to private peasant farms. But most rural people are not yet ready to start private farms. In our opinion, the persistence of household plots in their old form is, to a considerable degree, facilitated by the old form of taxation, according to which household plots are exempt from income tax. Land tax on household plots is insignificant and does not much affect the profitability of this category of farming. It also increases through the use of the resources of collective farms (without charge or with soft charge, legally or illegally). This privilege of household plots as a specific informal agrarian economy is understood by most of the rural population, which is reflected in their behaviour. Rural residents understand that if household plots are moved from the informal to the formal sector of the economy they are threatened by a heavy tax burden and an end to assistance from the collective enterprises.

Household plots now occupy a certain niche in the domestic food market. They produce highly labour-intensive products of plant growing and animal breeding, the production of which is unprofitable for large agricultural enterprises or peasant farms. In 2004, 91.8% of potatoes, 80.2% of vegetables, 52.5 % of meat (in carcass weight), 52.2% of milk were produced on household plots (RF Goskomstat, 2005a: 201). On the whole, the volume of production in the individual sector during the period of reformation has increased by over a third. But this growth, even on account of the contribution of peasant farms, has only mitigated but not fully compensated the dramatic fall of production output observed in collective enterprises. As a result, the index of the physical volume of agricultural output in all categories of farms in 2003 was only 69.5% in relation to 1990.

As to the prospects of this sector of the agrarian economy, it is also necessary to take into account its enforced character, which is reported by 60% of rural respondents. The sharp reduction of incomes that would earlier come from the sphere of the formal economy, the high unemployment rate makes rural residents turn to farming on household plots as a sphere of self-employment and additional source of family income. If rural people had a choice, then,

according to data from representative sociological surveys, only 7% of the population would agree to farm on household plots as a primary employment. Besides that, almost 40% of men and half of rural women noted the negative effect of household farming on their health because of its physical hardship and intensity (*Russia That We Are Finding*, 2003: 303,305). If the economic situation in the country improves, many rural people will curtail their operations on household plots.

The involuntary increase of production on household plots should not be taken as a sign of rural people's inclinations to proprietary activity or of their reluctance to work in the collective sector; it merely shows the Russian peasant's eternal readiness, who has more than once in history been left by his own state to the mercy of fate, to bear the entire burden of poorly designed social experiments. So there are absolutely no grounds to see the expansion of activity on household plots as the main track in the development of the agrarian economy.

Therefore, agrarian reform, instead of modernising agricultural production, has led to its backwardness. This is seen in the growth of small commodity production based on an antiquated system of management: heavy non-mechanised work, high labour intensity, production for private consumption, involvement of all family members, old and young. The consequence is the backwardness of the whole rural way of life and the loss of skills.

*The objective of the reformers to liquidate the collective segment of the agrarian economy has led to overgrowth in the small commodity sector whose existence depends much on collective enterprises. In other words, the habitual tandem "household plots – collective enterprises" is preserved. The circle is closed.*

### **The Trap of Permanent Unprofitability of Agricultural Enterprises**

One adverse result of the reformation of the agrarian sector was the severe deterioration in the economic situation of agricultural enterprises. During the years of reform the share of loss-making agricultural enterprises increased many times, in 2003 it was 49%. The state has tried to get rid of unprofitable proprietors through the bankruptcy procedure.

The current institution of bankruptcy of agricultural enterprises is, according to the apt words of a respondent, an "internal subversion" aimed at the liquidation of ineffective proprietors and at the compulsory conversion of wage workers to rational independent owners. The idea is good but its implementation often leads to quite opposite results.

Firstly, the bankruptcy procedure gives rise to adverse social consequences for the workers: redundancy, wage arrears, lower social security, losses for local budgets in tax revenues from the given enterprise.

Secondly, the bankruptcy procedure does not target the worst enterprises. Its main purpose is the blatant seizure of property: land, buildings and structures, agricultural equipment. As a result of the actions of executive bailiffs the capital assets of collective farms are sold for a trifle. Stripped of the means of production, the owners of land shares are compelled to let them on license to new masters on enslaving terms, or later to lose them altogether. Now, however, many rural residents begin to understand that the only capital they own as a result of the agrarian transformation are land shares. New owners-entrepreneurs do not conceal their intentions to buy up these very shares where the quality of soil is good and land plots are profitably located.

Where the arrival of new owners is not accompanied by the closure of the enterprise, the first step of the new leadership is radical reorganisation, harsh manpower policy, often accompanied by serious social costs. There are known cases of new owners of agricultural or processing enterprises who have heard enough about the vices of rural workers (alcohol consumption at the workplace, theft, low skills) and decide on extreme measures: the dismissal of local workers and the hiring instead of people from the city and bringing them to work daily according to the suitcase shift method. The so-called "statistical" prejudice also works when certain characteristics of the group are applied to particular individuals, which is one of the sources of discrimination on the labour market (Utinova, 2003: 31).

The desire of new owners to raise the efficiency of production and labour productivity is quite understandable and justified. But that often involves a high social price. One of the negative results of the reformation of agriculture is the mass appearance of villages where after the bankruptcy of agricultural enterprises there are practically no more large employers. Thus, in the Novosibirsk oblast there are between 200 and 300 such settlements, in 100 other villages enterprises are on the verge of being shut down, employment is practically nonexistent. The only source of survival under such conditions is the household plot. But where large agricultural enterprises cease their existence, operation on household plots is noticeably reduced. Without assistance from the collective farms which, in spite of their difficult economic conditions, continue to give aid to their workers, rural people have to decrease their household agricultural production. This situation exacerbates the disastrous situation of rural families for whom the household plot operation is nowadays one of their basic sources of livelihood.



*Therefore, the aim of the state to get rid of loss-making agricultural enterprises without assistance to redundant workers leads to the severe deterioration in the level and quality of life of the rural population.*

According to the programme of financial rehabilitation of agricultural enterprises, new juridical persons started to be formed instead of bankrupt enterprises (most often as agricultural production cooperatives – APC) and municipal unitary enterprises (MUE), to whose books the most liquid assets of the “rescued” enterprise (cattle, equipment, working capital) are transferred. The transfer of means of production from agricultural enterprises to municipal property and the creation on their basis of municipal unitary enterprises is one of the attempts at addressing the problem of insolvent enterprises, maintenance of rural jobs and at least minimal social protection for rural workers. According to analysts, unprofitable ineffective collective farms only exist in order to pump their resources to household plots that survive mostly due to this assistance.

But attempts to reanimate old institutional forms under the guise of municipal unitary enterprises (MUE) do not actually bring positive results. Old institutional forms are in contradiction with emergent new economic relations. Private investors do not risk investing in agricultural enterprises based on the state “public” form of ownership. In addition, the social consequences of such transformation are also unfavourable for most of the enterprise workers who lose their property shares that are again to be turned into collective assets to form capital funds of municipal unitary enterprises.

The recent programme of debt rescheduling for rural producers is an attempt to connect it with their efficiency. In other words, rural survival will be more rigidly dependent on the profitability of enterprises. *Deferred, restructured and partially depreciated debts stimulate, on the one hand, the collective farms to revise their policy with respect to the rights of stockholders and the workers to practice market-oriented behaviour and on the other, they strengthen paternalistic attitudes in the minds and behaviour of rural producers.*

So this beneficial initiative of financial aid to agricultural producers may turn out to be the next institutional trap, particularly because *it will further strengthen the typically soviet symbiotic relationship of individual and collective farms. As a result of this policy there is a positive social effect of assistance to households in running their home production and retaining jobs which are not necessarily of high social quality but inefficient agricultural enterprises are thereby preserved.*

## **The Trap of the Low Cost of Work and Poverty of the Rural Population**

As a result of primary capital accumulation in the 1990s in Russia, most of the population working on hire lost the right of ownership to the means of production and to the direct use of the results of their work. As during the establishment of capitalism when one of the main sources of wealth accumulation by the bourgeoisie was the destruction of small producers and higher exploitation of hired workers, at present the primary capital accumulation is continuing through the curtailment of wages, i.e. the necessary product for work power recuperation (Plyshevskii, 2004: 28).

Rural people, like other Russian citizens, still live with the so-called "privatisation trauma". *"All administration that was at the helm at the beginning of restructurisation seized all good equipment for themselves. I'm sorry for people. All their life they have worked hard, and now those who are not well informed are left with nothing"* (from an interview with a rural respondent).

The data from the survey on household budgets for 1997–2002 show deep rural-urban social inequality in material well-being. The proportion of the poor in the rural population in 1997–2002 was roughly 1.5 times higher than that in the urban population. And for the rural population the risk of falling into poverty was much higher than for the urbanites (Bogomolova, Tapilina, 2004: 53).

Work payment remains the main source of income of Russian citizens despite a slight curtailment of its share compared with the pre-reform period. According to official statistics, in 2001 work payment in the structure of money income of households was 64.6% (by comparison, in 1990 its proportion was 76.4% (RF Goskomstat 2002: 104). At the same time, the wages of agricultural workers are nowadays the lowest among the economic sectors. In 2004 the monthly nominal assigned wage of workers in agriculture was 2778.3 roubles, or 40.7% of the national average and was the survival minimum of the working population [Calculated by the source: (RF Goskomstat, 2005a: 107, 108, 111)]. According to 75% of the surveyed rural workers, their work is underpaid and is not equivalent to their skills or work contribution.

The economists' calculations show that the hourly payment in Russia is USD \$ 1.7, i.e. 1.5 lower than in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), while labour productivity in manufacturing is at the European average. Hourly payment in Russia is 13.5 times lower if compared with the G7 countries and 18.2 times lower than in Northern Europe (Norway, Denmark, Sweden,



Finland). At the same time, the gap in the added value per worker is not so high: it is 2.3 times lower than in the G7 countries and 2.6 times lower than in Northern Europe (Nureyev, 2006) (table, Figs. 1 – 2). The percentage of labour costs in the gross internal product in the national economy fell from 37.7% in 1995 to 34% in 2004 (RF Goskomstat: Work and Employment in Russia, 2005b: 412).

According to UN recommendations, work payment below \$ 3 per hour is unacceptable and leads to loss of incentive among workers.

Low wages allow entrepreneurs to curtail production costs because of the narrowness of the domestic market but this limits capital accumulation. Besides, this practically ruins the economic incentive to work. (Plyshevskii, 2004: 26). The agrarian sector experiences double pressure from both low work cost of agricultural workers and the low effective demand of the rest of the population. *This is another institutional trap.*

Table 1. Ratio of wage and labour productivity in Russia to other world countries (Russia = 1, 2004)

	Hourly wage	Added value per one employed
Northern Europe ( <i>Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland</i> )	18.2	2.6
G7	13.5	2.3
Mediterranean region ( <i>Portugal, Greece, Spain, Slovenia, Turkey, Israel</i> )	5.2	1.5
South-Eastern Asia ( <i>South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore</i> )	4.0	2.0
Central and Eastern Europe ( <i>Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Czech Republic</i> )	1.5	1.0
Latin America ( <i>Chile, Columbia, Mexico, Venezuela</i> )	1.4	1.0

Source: IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook, 2005; paper by A. R. Belousov "Dolgosrochnyie trendy Rossiiskoi ekonomiki" (Long-term trends in the Russian Economy), 2005: 29. <http://www.ecsocman.edu.ru/db/msg/274590/print.html> 20.04.2006.

A no less dangerous consequence of work depreciation and regular violation of payment (long wage arrears, high share of payment in kind, no compensation for work in harmful working conditions, non-payment for annual leave, etc.) unavoidably cause maladaptation of the rural population. It destroys work motivation, decreases the instrumental and terminal value of work, causes tolerance to poverty, low living standards, orientation to survival and not to the increase of family assets, marginalisation of the rural population.

It is known that "unemployment in the legal sector increases the number of crimes against property not because it arouses unrest and cruelty in people, but because it reduces "benefit" from legal professions" (Becker, 1993:34).

If we proceed from public interests, then *the institutional system which does not motivate social groups to rational behaviour cannot be described as effective, and the process of legalisation of non-rational behavioural norms existing in practice can be considered an institutional trap.*

The situation is aggravated by the widespread use of surrogate forms of work payment, delayed wages. The substitution of money payment for work in formal and informal segments of the rural labour market by surrogates (payment in kind, with goods produced at this employment, at credit record, exchange of services, etc.), the widespread non-payment of wages has led to money transformation. People in rural areas have forgotten the true role of money. Instead of financial remuneration, people receive grain, livestock products, fodder for stock, young animals for operation on household plots, wood, coal and other goods. Alcohol has become a common form of payment for a day's work.

This situation is certainly caused by inefficiency, low profitability of agricultural production often based on disparity in farming prices compared with industrial and fuel sectors, low solvent demand in rural areas, insufficient assistance to the rural producer from the state.

Another cause is the high rate of social tax which provokes farm managers to hide a certain percentage of work payment. As a result, the state loses considerable amounts of resources assigned to deal with social problems, which further deteriorates the situation of rural workers. This is a vicious cycle: the government trying to tackle the most urgent social problems increases taxes, while the farms in order to survive use all possible methods to dodge these taxes. Consequently social problems remain unsolved. Possibly, the planned reduction of social tax on farms will help to improve the situation in the future, though it will hardly help avoid such institutional traps entirely.

The third cause is the unfairness of some employers who, having the necessary resources, do not perform their contract obligations. As a result, rural people spend years without being paid for their work and when they do eventually receive money, they do not know what to do with these pieces of paper.

Obviously, occasional unexpectedly received payments are seen by the workers not as their regular work remuneration but as a fortuitous perquisite. According to this, the function of this money changes. Recent studies show that money is associated with "multiple symbolic meanings". For example, even at absolute identity of the received amounts people perceive this unexpected

income quite differently when it is a bonus or a legacy (Zelizer, 2004). According to V. Zelizer's logic, money received by the worker as *regular* wages or *occasional* earnings is seen as different money with a different purpose. So in the case of occasional, "unexpected" payment, money is perceived as luck and is not spent on immediate family needs but goes on other things, such as drinking.

The emergence of multiple money in rural areas also fosters the naturalisation of household plot operation. Because of the absence of regular earnings, rural families, when they expand their small farming activity, they do so with a specific purpose, such as breeding one young bull to pay for their children's studies at a college and another to "equip" the children for school or have a wedding party, etc.

Therefore, money in rural areas ceases to be a measure of work, accumulation and saving. In the practice of economic relations and social exchange, barter and non-monetary forms of settlement are widespread. In rural areas the universal equivalent, a special form of "social money", according to V. Zelizer (Zelizer V., 2004) is alcohol, fodder, grain, bread, young animals, services, etc.

*The emergence of ineffective social practices as a result of poor performance by public institutions of their functions can also be called an institutional trap.*

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Dramatic changes in socio-economic relations in the 1990s-2000s, the globalisation of economic, political and information space, Russia's imminent accession to the World Trade Organisation require the development of a clear understanding of the role and place of the agrarian sector in the current environment. The Government's attempts at changing the situation in the agrarian sphere by the implementation of priority national projects is obviously positive and momentous. The project Development of Agro-Industrial Complex (AIC) provides three basic directions: the accelerated development of stock breeding, the stimulation of small forms of farming, the provision of young specialists and their families in rural areas with affordable housing.

The first direction is realised by increased leasing supplies of breeder cattle, machinery and equipment for animal breeding, prolongation of leasing to 10 years, cut rates for borrowed funds, increased accessibility of long-term loans up to 8 years.

The second direction of the National Project are increased sales of products produced by peasant farms and on household plots due to lower rates on loans,



development of infrastructure of services to small forms of AIC in procurement, supply-sale, processing and credit cooperatives.

The third direction is the development of mortgage crediting of young specialists and their families for the purchase or building of individual housing.

However, the measures undertaken do not constitute a uniform concept of the AIC development under new economic conditions and are designed not so much at long-run development of the sector as at the solution of separate current problems, which considerably diminishes the value and efficiency of the undertaken measures. The author's modest attempts at a concept of agricultural development to 2025 are contained in Kalugina, Fadeyeva, 2006. This topic is beyond the framework of this paper.

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