



Reimagining informal food practices: sustainability lessons from the European East

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Aim of the presentation: three points

- String of headline findings on East European informal food practices (**food self-provisioning – FSP**):
 - extent
 - long-term stability
 - largely unintended – but actual – ‘quiet’ sustainability
- Factors in marginalization of this knowledge in international sustainability scholarship
- Need to reverse this trend: European East should be read as a place producing novel and internationally relevant knowledge useful for reimagining the food system

What are those East Europeans playing at over there? Are they so lazy that they can't even go to the (food) shop?



Artist: Urmas Nemvalts, *Postimees* daily, Estonia, 8 June 2019

Headline findings on East European FSP



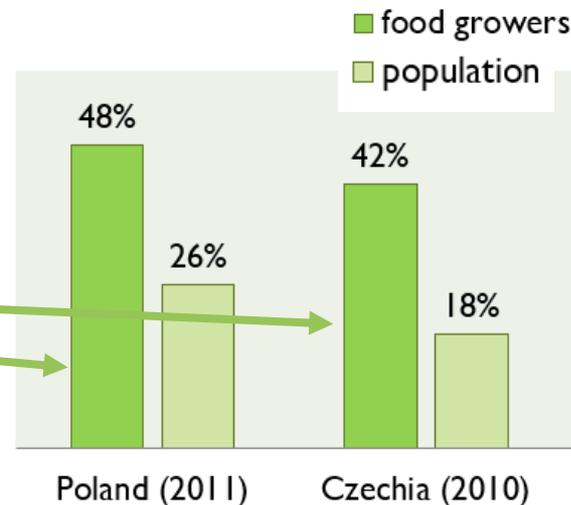
- **Widespread** - in Hungary 36%, Czechia 40%, Poland 54%, Croatia 50% of population grows food
- **Socially diverse** – people from all educational and occupational backgrounds grow food (58% Poles with primary and 55% with tertiary education grow food)
- **Evenly distributed across class and economic status** (but: more middle than working class activity: PL 55% middle; 51% working; CZ middle 43% and working 37%)
- **Generous activity** – many growers share their produce with others (Czechia 60% and Poland 40%) – with family, friends, neighbours...

Sources: Smith & Jehlička (2013); Smith, Kostelecký & Jehlička (2015), Ančić, Domazet & Župarić-Iljić (2019)

Headline findings on East European FSP

Country/ year	2003	2005	2009	2010	2011	2013	2015	2018
Bulgaria	50							
Croatia								50
Czechia	30	42	43	43			38	
Hungary	45					36		
Poland	38				54			

% of population growing food



- Nearly ½ of Polish and Czech food growers produce non-certified organic food

- Strong food relocalisation (the shortest food chain garden → kitchen)

- Importantly – East European FSP has remained stable while

societies have become richer

Sources: Smith & Jehlička (2013); Smith, Kostelecký & Jehlička (2015), Ančić, Domazet & Župarić-Iljić (2019)

Headline findings on East European FSP

- In Czech food-growing households:

- 41% of vegetables
- 40% of fruits
- 38% of eggs - come from non-market sources (growing and sharing) (2015)



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- Czech general population (both food-growing and non-growing households considered):

- 20% of all vegetables, fruits, potatoes and eggs consumed in Czech households either directly produced by the household or received as a gift

- UK households (2014):

- FSP and sharing accounted for: 3% of fresh fruit and vegetables and 5% of eggs

Important: motivations for Polish & Czech FSP

- healthy, fresh food & a hobby
- economic motivation / financial saving – secondary consideration

Source: Smith & Jehlička (2013); Smith, Kostelecký & Jehlička (2015), DEFRA (2015)

An ideal form of relocalized, sustainable food system?

- What has emerged from our investigation - an almost ideal form of:
 - socially diverse, embedded and routinised food related behaviours
 - compatible with activists' and scholars' ideas about transformations towards sustainable food systems
- Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) model
- BUT: it was not how East European FSP was represented in international scholarship
- until the 2010s produced almost exclusively by Western researchers
- no attempts to include insights from this research to inform internationally recognized theorizations on sustainable food alternatives



Circulation of knowledge on East European FSP within development & area studies

- Instead, Western scholars studying these practices uniformly framed them as stories of survival, coping, hardship, poverty & underdevelopment
- → difficult to expect knowledge on practices associated with negative connotations to inspire others
- In addition:
 - knowledge on EE FSP circulated within the subfield of 'East European area studies' - little impact on general social scientific knowledge
 - reluctance to incorporate knowledge from Eastern Europe into 'global knowledges' (Suchland 2011)

Article titles:

- **Back to Basics:** Households food production in Russia
- You can **buy almost anything with potatoes:** examination of barter during **economic crisis** in Bulgaria
- Russian **Poverty: Muddling through** economic transition with **garden plots**

No of citations in the Web of Science of 14 frequently cited articles on East European household food production (1993 – 2010)

East European knowledge does not ‘travel’ beyond East European area studies.....

TABLE 2 Fourteen frequently cited articles on East European household food production published between 1993 and 2010

Citation area	No. of citations	%
<u>Postsocialist</u> area studies (incl. transition, <u>postsocialist</u> agriculture, economic development...)	184	71.6
General economics, economic geography, social anthropology	73	28.4
Total	257	100

Average number of citations per article was 18.4; the number of citations ranged from 6 to 49 and 44 self-citations were excluded (Web of Science, 24 March 2015).

‘The structure of knowledge production grants power and authority to only a very few places’ → this ‘determines which knowledge travels most effectively and thus gains status as “theory”’ (Robinson, 2011: 126-127)

Factor 1 - The othering of Eastern Europe: the region as a perennial learner and recipient

- Eastern Europe portrayed as ‘not yet European’, as ‘the Other against which Western Europe has long narrated its own civilization and progress’ (Müller 2018)
- Two hundred years of ‘advice’ flowing from West to East (Wolff 1994)
- Popular strand of research: how East European societies receive and ‘learn’ AFNs initiatives imported from the West in their role as passive recipients of Western sustainability agendas (Mincyte 2012)
- Two effects of this approach:
 - a) obscures the diversity of food practices in Eastern Europe
 - b) prioritises a marginal set of practices over the more prevalent ones

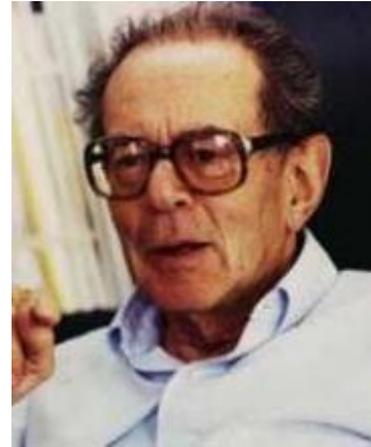
Factor 2 – Developmentalist perspective: food self-provisioning as a sign of East European residuality and non-modernity

- Developmentalist perspective: post-1989 transformation of Eastern Europe seen as a unidirectional process of development from a non-market to a market, from an informal to a formal economy, and from defensive strategies to entrepreneurialism i.e. tradition → modernity
- Disappointment in some academic (and expert – cartoon) circles over refusal of EE household food growers to transform into commercial farming (equated with development)
- the European East simultaneously viewed as a) on the slow linear development path and b) as stuck in time (retrospective markers ‘ex-Soviet’ and ‘ old Eastern Bloc’ [Müller 2018])

‘The multiplicities of the spatial have been rendered as merely stages in the temporal queue’ (Massey, 2005: 71)

Factor 3 – The economization of social science research on Eastern Europe

- The focus on poverty, shortage, and scarcity – Factor 3 that prevented EE FSP practices from being reframed as inspiring, innovative, and transferrable to other contexts
- One reason for framing EE FSP primarily as an economic rather than cultural practice was the overall tendency to read Eastern Europe as an economically deficient context.
- East European developments in social sciences read through the economist lens - traced to influential neo-institutionalist analyses and to the concept of ‘shortage economy’ (Hungarian-American economist János Kornai [Thelen, 2011])



János Kornai

Factor 4 – Eastern Europe – a social context outside the theory-generating axis?

- from the Western perspective, East European informal food networks = an impediment to market developments rather than a sign of social resilience, innovation and creativity (as in the West)
- Also: ‘unlike in the South, people have not found in the East [...] a source of alternatives to neoliberalism [and] environmental destruction’ (Müller 2018) → in contrast to the South, the European East has not become a valued source of a multiplicity of knowledge
- This puzzle points to the need to consider the **position of Eastern Europe** in relation to **the axis that marks the places where theoretically valid knowledge is created**
- Eastern Europe’s location outside the axis that connects the former metropolises with former colonies in the circuits of internationally recognized knowledge (theory)

Factor 4 – Eastern Europe – a social context outside the theory-generating axis?

- It seems that Jennifer Robinson's (2011) claims about the structure of knowledge production granting power to very few places to make knowledge to travel and to become theory needs to be modified →
- → The structure of knowledge production also gives these “places” the power to select which contexts outside the core will be included in the set of theory-generating social settings
- The European East + everyday food practices have not been included in the set of contexts in which theory on food systems' sustainability is created – despite these practices' strong sustainability credentials

“In the global circulation of signs, the East is not nearly as legible as the Global South, where colonialism has created shared languages, institutions, knowledge systems and social bonds. Uganda is more easily knowable in the global centres of media and scholarship than Ukraine, Chile is more familiar than Czechia and Laos is closer than Latvia.” (Müller 2020)

Why does all this matter?

- Why does all this matter? Why is it important to understand this ‘missed opportunity’ or ‘lessons from Eastern Europe that have not been learnt’?
- 1. The gravity of global environmental crisis to which the mainstream Northern food system contributes requires searching for responses in all social contexts, not just in the West / centre where the conventional notion of sustainability was coined
- 2. Need to find ways of making the flow of scholarly communication multidirectional as opposed to the unidirectional West → the Rest (East, South....) flow - while keeping in mind the power structure behind theory production



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- Sustainable practices such as FSP do not necessarily disappear with greater affluence
- → important lessons on the enmeshing of informal food practices with rapid marketization (significant findings for societies such as post-Soviet countries or China and Vietnam)
- Scholarship on EE FSP invites us to reimagine the food system:
 - To include informal, everyday, non-market forms of behaviour and consider how they fit in and interact with market-based forms of sustainable consumption

- Scholarship on EE FSP invites us to think about sustainability in novel ways:
 - To go beyond intentionality of sustainable behaviour to include ‘sustainability by outcome rather than intention’ (‘quiet sustainability’)
 - To extend the notion of sustainability beyond those based on constraints and limitations -
 - to include sustainable behaviours that are associated with joy and exuberance
 - To consider implications of a possible loss of existing informal food practices for sustainability → marketisation, longer food supply chains...(we usually think of sustainability as developing something new, creative, innovative, technology-based...)



Spaces of Quiet
Sustainability

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THANK YOU



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