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Heterogeneity of stakeholders as an obstacle to the development of agricultural cooperatives in Russia

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Abstract. The paper presents a new approach to the explanation of the failure of cooperative model in the post-Soviet agriculture. This approach is based on the stakeholder theory: thus, performing all functions of heterogeneous stakeholders on the regular basis may be too resource-intensive, and cooperative members may not have enough competencies for such tasks. First, the study supplements the existing research by providing a new explanation for the non-attractiveness of the cooperative business organization for Russian farmers. Second, the paper presents a link between the stakeholder theory of cooperatives and the theory of cooperative organization as developed by Ivan Emelianoff (1995) in his groundbreaking work *Economic Theory of Cooperation*. Third, the study proves in a new way the hybrid nature of cooperatives. The author focuses on agricultural cooperatives; however, the conclusions are valid for cooperative organizations in other industries. The paper starts with a short note on methodology — a description of stakeholder theory as applied to the study of cooperative organizations and a study of the hybrid nature of cooperatives; then follows a review of main research directions in the study of the failure of the cooperative movement in Russian agriculture, a section on the contradictions between the stakeholder theory of cooperatives and the farmers' interests of farmers, and a section on the possible ways for resolving these contradictions. New forms of business organization should emerge as a compromise between an ideal firm and an ideal cooperative. These new forms would help farmers to benefit from cooperation instead of formal participation in it.

Keywords: cooperative, stakeholder theory, platform, heterogeneity of stakeholders

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Aleksandr Dmitrievich Bilimovich, a prominent Russian scholar, in his book *Cooperatives in Russia Before, Under and After the Bolsheviks*, published during his emigration in 1955, expressed the hope that after the fall of the Soviet economic system the flourishing cooperative ecosystem of tsarist Russia would revive (Bilimovich, 2005). Unfortunately, unlike his other numerous forecasts about the destiny of the post-Soviet economy, this expectation never came true. Cooperatives in Russia exist as a marginal form of business organization in agriculture, and their role in the national economy is negligible (Yanbykh et al., 2019). Moreover, even existing cooperatives hardly comply with cooperative principles (Kurakin, Visser, 2017).

This failure of the cooperative concept in post-Soviet Russia (and, more specifically, in Russian agriculture) is thought-provoking as it contradicts both the historical tradition of the cooperative movement success before 1917 and the collectivist (pseudo-cooperative) organization of the Soviet agriculture. There are many explanations of this phenomenon (distrust due to the forced Soviet collectivization, lack of professional cooperative leaders, legislation, etc.); however, no attention has been paid to the stakeholder theory as a potential explanation of this failure. The paper presents an attempt to understand the failure of cooperatives in Russia in the stakeholder theory perspective: the idea of cooperation is potentially attractive but is rarely implemented as Russian farmers may not want to combine roles of various stakeholders (heterogeneity of stakeholders' roles is one of the key distinctive features of cooperatives). The combination of different stakeholders' roles may require specific competencies (which farmers may lack) and too many efforts. Instead, Russian farmers would prefer alternative management structures based on implicit cooperation (with separated stakeholder roles) or not requiring substantial efforts (this approach establishes a link between stakeholder theory and transaction costs economy which is a popular tool in the cooperative research (Hendrikse, Veerman, 2001; Leathers, 2006; Pereira, 2016)).

The foundations of the stakeholder theory were developed by R. E. Freeman (1984). According to the stakeholder approach, an organization must benefit to, cooperate with and use resources of various groups of its stakeholders (employees, suppliers, customers, competitors, creditors, investors, local communities, etc.). As the interests of stakeholders are not identical, the company should find a compromise between them. Likewise, different groups of stakeholders cooperate and compete in order to reach their goals.

As the stakeholder theory was proposed for business organization, one may question its applicability to cooperatives (as their nature is different from the investor-owned firms). However, cooperatives are both business structures (ensure a high level of commercial efficiency in order to survive in the capitalist economy) and social projects (based on social values) (Benavides, Ehrenhard, 2021; Grashuis, Cook, 2017; Novkovic, 2008; Puusa et al., 2013). This dual nature of cooperatives justifies the use of the stakeholder theory, and the interpretation of cooperatives as firms with a specific system of attributes is quite common (Grashuis, Cook, 2016).

When applied to cooperatives, the stakeholder theory demonstrates the non-typical nature of cooperatives. In investor-owned companies, different groups of stakeholders are clearly separated from each other, while in cooperatives, members simultaneously perform roles of several stakeholders — investors, patrons, owners and community members (Limnios et al., 2018). This is called heterogeneity of stakeholders and is inherent to cooperatives (Limnios et al., 2018; Lebedintseva, Deryugin, 2022; Novkovic et al., 2022). Theoretically this heterogene-

ity of members as stakeholders should eliminate the conflict of interests between these groups. As members belong to different groups of stakeholders, they reconcile interests typical for each group.

This interpretation of the stakeholder nature of cooperatives is in line with the concept proposed by Ivan Emelianoff. According to Emelianoff (1995), cooperatives, unlike investor-owned firms, have no interests distinct from interests of their members. As Awoke (2019) puts it, “cooperatives exist in order to provide economic and social benefits to their members”. Companies have to reconcile interests of various groups of external and internal stakeholders, and such reconciliation activities are a source of values for stakeholders and the firm. As cooperative members are heterogeneous as stakeholders with no conflict of interests, there is no need for a cooperative to reconcile their interests and to benefit from such reconciliation activities (cooperatives unite main groups of homogenous stakeholders into a heterogeneous group). Technically the reconciliation of interests takes place when members found or join a cooperative and accept their heterogeneous role as stakeholders. Thus, cooperatives do not have their own goals (distinct from the goals of their members) and serve their members’ interests.

It should be noted that the absence of conflict of interests between different groups of stakeholders does not mean that there is no diversity in members’ preferences (Iliopoulos, Valentinov, 2022). The diversity of preferences (based, for example, on different size of companies, different types of products, etc.) may create frictions within cooperatives (Grashuis, Cook, 2021): some historical forms of cooperatives, for instance, communes with strong religious, social and family ties like kibbutz (Achouch, 2022), were implicitly oriented towards elimination of this diversity by imposing common values on their members (or due to common values of their members); however, this issues is beyond the scope of the paper.

The stakeholder approach ensures a better understand of the hybrid nature of cooperatives. Scholars identify two types of hybridity in cooperative organizations: cooperatives as hybrid institutional arrangements in the new institutional economy (Ménard, 2004; 2022) — as a form of compromise between hierarchy and market (Williamson, 1991); cooperatives play a dual role as they are both economic and social organizations (Novkovic, 2008).

However, according to the stakeholder approach, cooperatives (as an ideal type of organization) should not be considered as hybrids. There is a continuum between investor-owned firms (organizations with distinct homogenous stakeholders) and cooperatives (organizations with merged heterogeneous stakeholders). Obviously, the absolute heterogeneity of cooperative members as stakeholders is an idealistic assumption. First, a full combination of stakeholders’ roles is hardly possible (it can be only partial); second, cooperatives interact with external stakeholders. It means that real cooperatives are hy-

brids of ideal firms and ideal cooperatives, which is true for firms if stakeholders combine different functions, for instance, customers act as investors due to crowdfunding (Fig. 1 presents the business aspect of cooperatives not their social side). However, even partial combination of stakeholders' roles means that heterogeneity is an inherent feature of cooperatives, which can be a potential explanation for their problematic development in Russia).

Firms	Real cooperatives	
	Partially heterogenous stakeholders	Cooperatives
Homogenous stakeholders	Real firms	Heterogenous stakeholders

Fig. 1. Firm-cooperative continuum

Figure 1 explains another hybridity of cooperatives as based on the heterogeneity of their stakeholders: ideal cooperatives (fully heterogeneous stakeholders) are not hybrids (unlike in the continua described above), they represent one pole of this continuum, the importance of which is supported by the fact that in most countries (at least in Europe) cooperatives are legally organized as firms (Forney, Häberli, 2017).

Thus, economic organizations can simultaneously belong to different continuum poles, i.e., show different types of hybridities (Le Velly, Dufeu, 2016). Moreover, the role of the same economic organization may differ in different continua: in some continua, its role can be hybrid, in other — as an economic organization (Valentinov, 2004).

There are many types of cooperatives, and new models develop as cooperative organizations easily adopt new governance, organizational and economic forms in order to better satisfy the needs of their members (Achouch, 2022; Errasti, Mendizabal, 2007; Fisher, Nading, 2021; Hernández Carrión, 2022; Iliopoulos, Theodorakopoulou, 2014; Murphy, Dayan, 2021; Nilsson, 2022; Papadimitropoulos, 2021; Rolfe et al., 2022; Silva, Coleman, 2021; Deshkovskaya, 2009a; 2009b). Obviously, each type of cooperative (probably each cooperative) has its own unique model of heterogeneity of stakeholders.

Unfortunately, this idealistic stakeholder representation of cooperatives does not correspond to real life. While cooperative members may not have conflict of stakeholder interests, they may not have competencies necessary to perform functions of different groups of stakeholders (Michaud, Audebrand, 2022). Members can show different levels of commitment, which decreases the cooperative efficiency (Grashuis, Su, 2019). Moreover, they may not want to perform all functions typical for these groups of stakeholders, as Ozerov (1894) proved in the case study of the Saint Petersburg consumers' cooperative: members want-

ed to benefit from their membership but did not show any intention to participate in cooperative activities; the situation remains the same in Finland in 2018 (Talonen et al., 2018) — members of consumers' cooperatives consider themselves its customers rather than owners, which naturally leads to tensions in cooperatives and makes them non-attractive for potential members as the expected contribution to cooperative is considered too high. According to Grashuis (2018), sometimes the ownership and control can become too burdensome for the cooperative, which leads to its transformation into another governance structure. This proves the dialectic nature of heterogeneity of stakeholders as a feature of cooperatives: this heterogeneity can be both a key advantage (helps to prevent conflict of interests) and a source of problems (if members lack competencies necessary to perform functions of different stakeholders or costs of these functions are too high).

The works on the failure of the cooperative movement in post-Soviet Russia can be divided into the following research directions:

1. Lack of trust in cooperatives as determined by forced collectivization (Hagedorn, 2014). Collectivization destroyed the very idea of cooperation. While this problem is typical for most post-socialist European countries (Fałkowski et al., 2017), some of these states seem to be overcoming this legacy (Iliopoulos et al., 2019; Imami et al., 2021; Wolz et al., 2020).
2. Insufficient environment for the development of cooperatives (Hagedorn, 2014). Potential members do not have enough competencies and do not fully understand the advantages of the cooperative organization (even consultants in cooperation show poor professional skills (Antonova et al., 2022)). It is difficult to find potential cooperative leaders who would be able to organize a cooperative and to cope with members' opportunism and diverse preferences.
3. Legal framework does not support cooperation. The state support is not sufficient, although in some Russian regions, in which the local authorities support cooperatives, they are quite successful. It should be noted that the agrarian policy of the Russian government is not uniform but constantly supports large-scale rather than small private farming (Wolz et al., 2016), which led to uncertainty among farmers. Large farms seem to be prioritized due to implementing the policy of import substitution and ensuring food security as crucial for Russian in the current geopolitical situation (Plotnikov et al., 2021). Obviously, such state policies do not contribute to the cooperative development. Potential members do not trust each other and are not ready to invest their efforts into collective actions and management as demanding too many efforts.
4. Transformation of agricultural production. During the golden age of the Russian cooperation (before 1917), most cooperative members produced the same standardized products, and

cooperatives were responsible for marketing and sales of this produce (Bilimovich, 2005). Post-Soviet farmers are interested in the unique products and do not want to mix their products with similar items supplied by other farmers. Farmers who produce standardized products prefer to be contract suppliers to large agricultural companies instead of cooperatives (Vinogradsky, Vinogradskaya, 2022).

Some of these problems are typical for other countries (Ortmann, King, 2007). For instance, farmers in Greece are often unaware about the advantages of cooperatives, which prevents them from joining (Pliakoura et al., 2022). The same is true for energy cooperatives in Germany (Fischer et al., 2021). Education and information sessions have a positive impact on the youth intentions to participate in dairy cooperatives in Ireland (Cele, 2022). Government support and professional managers are the key success factors of agricultural producers' cooperatives in China (Zhang et al., 2020). However, some barriers are specific for Russia. For example, Poland farmers producing standardized mixes do join cooperatives (Falkowski, Chlebicka 2021).

Nevertheless, the lack or low level of the organized cooperation development does not mean that there is no cooperation at all. Farmers in post-Soviet countries may join informal and/or occasional partnerships in order to reach common goals (Falkowski et al., 2017). For instance, Albanian farmers organize informal groups to get a certificate of quality for their products (Imami et al., 2021). The willingness to join such partnerships greatly depends on trust in family ties, personal relationships etc. The same applies to other types of cooperation in other countries, for example, in Italy customers, instead of creating formal consumers' cooperatives, established Solidarity Purchase Groups (Baldi et al., 2019; Fonte, 2013; Maestripieri et al., 2018).

Russian farmers are interested in benefiting from cooperation but do not want to join formal cooperatives (Bozhkova et al., 2020; Golovina et al., 2019). The lack of interest in cooperation may be, at least partially, rooted in the unwillingness to perform all functions of heterogeneous stakeholders at a regular basis. Being heterogeneous stakeholders creates personal tensions, i.e., new forms of cooperation can appear only if this contradiction is resolved.

Heterogeneity of stakeholders can cause the following negative effects:

- Low efficiency of cooperatives due to the lack of competencies necessary to perform functions of different stakeholders (Michaud, Audebrand, 2022). While farmers can be competent enough to organize small business, they may not be able to develop a strategy for a bigger structure and to ensure its everyday management, especially under the high members' diversity. The common way to avoid this problem is to hire professional managers (Chaddad, Iliopoulos, 2013), which would reduce heterogeneity of stakeholders. However, if farmers

think that they do not have necessary competencies they may not be interested in founding a cooperative.

- The change in balance of personal and group goals. Cooperative members are to contribute to cooperative success, which means not only member fees but also collective management, etc.: heterogeneity of stakeholders has to ensure contributions of all groups of stakeholders (Novkovic et al., 2022). These contributions redirect farmers' efforts from their personal businesses to the cooperative. If such contributions are required on a regular basis, the costs of participation in the cooperative can become too high for its members (at the expense of their businesses). Therefore, farmers may want to remain small producers not putting efforts into coordination and management of any collective structure (due to high costs and lack of specific competencies). If the costs of participation are too high farmers will avoid founding or joining the cooperative. However, they may still participate in cooperative projects not requiring regular efforts and with low costs of participation (informal and/or occasional projects). Empirical data supports this idea as in post-Soviet countries farmers prefer informal structures.

Thus, being heterogeneous stakeholders creates personal tensions for farmers, which makes formal cooperation unattractive for them, and they choose other forms of cooperation in order to survive in the market dominated by large agroholdings (Wegren 2018). Moreover, farmers want to preserve their uniqueness and do not wish to participate in collective actions due to their unwillingness to perform the role of heterogeneous stakeholders. It means that farmers want to benefit from cooperation but do not trust in formal participation in cooperatives, i.e., they may choose between three models:

1. Delegating coordination functions to a professional company (operator) which would bring farmers together, develop a product range and provide marketing infrastructure for sales. In this case farmers do not have to openly cooperate with each other, their cooperation is implicit as they contribute to the collective offer. Each farmer has the contract with this professional operator. Farmers preserve their uniqueness as their products are not mixed up and are sold separately under the farmer's brand. A good example of this model are digital platforms of farm products, which are becoming popular in Russia (for instance, Esh Derevenskoe <https://esh-derevenskoe.ru/>). This model represents an application of the platform approach: farmers benefit from the participation in a large organization without any formal commitment. This model represents a hybrid between an ideal firm and an ideal cooperative (obviously being closer to an ideal firm). Technically this model means that farmers pay the operator for the coordination function. The heterogeneity of stakeholders is almost invis-

ible. Farmers may develop the sense of psychological ownership (without any formal property rights to the marketing infrastructure). Farmers can partially invest into the development of this infrastructure. Finally, they are community members of this platform (but the community is implicit). The use of this model does not mean that farmers make a common decision to invite a professional operator — rather an operator offers its coordination services to individual farmers. According to the continuum on Figure 1, this model is closer to firms than cooperatives.

2. Occasional and/or informal partnerships like REKO-rings (Ehrnström-Fuentes, Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2019; Gruvaeus, Dahlin, 2021; Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2021). Participation in such groups does not require constant heterogeneity of stakeholders, and this heterogeneity is less visible than in traditional cooperatives. This model represented by informal networks exists in Russia (Golovina et al., 2019), and on the continuum ‘firms-cooperatives’ it is closer to cooperatives except for its informal and/or occasional type.
3. Cooperation in such a way that farmers benefit from cooperative without contributing to it as heterogeneous stakeholders. As the cooperative movement proves, this model is quite common for consumers’ cooperatives (Ozerov, 1894; Talonen et al., 2018) and makes cooperatives similar to investor-owned firms as cooperative members support the cooperative financially and use coordination services provided by the cooperative management. Members join cooperatives and make a minimal required contribution (like participation fees); they do not participate in everyday management or work; they simply consider themselves cooperative’s customers (not owners or managers) and benefit from cooperative services (this model of cooperative ‘free ride’ differs from the traditional approach in which ‘free ride’ implies the use of cooperative benefits by non-members (Iliopoulos, Theodorakopoulou, 2014)). Cooperative members play just one stakeholder role and avoid heterogeneity of stakeholders, which reduces the costs of participation. Unfortunately, this model makes cooperatives precarious as the financial support is the only members’ contribution. The lack of other contributions determined the scarcity of cooperative resources. However, the general lack of trust in potential cooperative partners does not allow the use of this model in Russia.

The following hypotheses can be formulated for the further empirical study: 1) Farmers do not wish to join cooperatives as they do not want to perform functions of heterogeneous stakeholders due to high resource costs and lack of specific competencies; 2) Farmers’ platforms represent a compromise between farmers’ willingness to benefit from participation in large organizations and farmers’ unwilling-

ness to perform functions of heterogeneous stakeholders; 3) Farmers can accept the role of heterogeneous stakeholders in occasional and/or informal cooperative partnerships due to their temporality and low resource costs. These three models do not correspond to the classic cooperative principles but can help farmers benefit from cooperation (including resource pooling).

Performing all functions of heterogeneous stakeholders requires too many efforts from cooperative members and creates personal tensions, which is why they try to find a compromise between an ideal investor-owned firm and an ideal cooperative (Chibanda et al., 2009; Saladarré et al., 2018) and can prefer informal and/or occasional partnerships and networks instead of formal organizations in order to reduce the costs of participation. Such compromise forms may be very different from traditional cooperatives, but they should not be forbidden or avoided as they provide members with the services they need. It is important to consider these new forms of cooperation in the cooperative research and to provide environment for their development.

Thus, the proposed explanation of the failure of cooperatives in the post-Soviet Russian agriculture, which is based on the stakeholder theory of the firm, is neither exhaustive nor self-sufficient. It complements the existing ideas about the reasons of this failure but does not replace them. The proposed explanation shows that, in addition to external factors (lack of leaders, distrust, low awareness, etc.), inherent features of cooperatives (heterogeneity of stakeholders) should be taken into account to explain the development of agricultural cooperation in post-Soviet Russia.

The ecosystem favorable for agricultural cooperatives, which existed in Russia before 1917, can be an interesting challenge for the concept developed in this paper. Why farmers of tsarist Russia were eager to cooperate despite the heterogeneity of stakeholders? While the question is beyond the scope of the paper, an answer may be that before 1917 the key problems of heterogeneity of stakeholders could be more easily solved due to a higher level of mutual trust and to the institutional support of the society and cooperative enthusiasts. In addition, the model of production and types of products were more similar for all farmers in the same region. Finally, farmers were not dispersed (in most cases belonged to one rural community), which simplified communications and helped to build trust (Bilimovich, 2005). Such a social-economic homogeneity eliminated the problems of heterogeneity of stakeholders (it could be even an advantage — just like the cooperative model presupposed). In other words, institutional environment can reinforce both strong and weak sides of heterogeneity of stakeholders, i.e. the favorable institutional environment can solve the problem of heterogeneity of stakeholders, proving the close link between external (institutional environment) and external (heterogeneity of stakeholders) factors of the cooperative success and failure.

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Гетерогенность участников как препятствие для развития сельскохозяйственных кооперативов в России

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Аннотация. В статье представлен новый подход к проблеме несостоятельности кооперативной модели в постсоветском сельском хозяйстве. Этот подход основан на теории стейкхолдеров (заинтересованных сторон): выполнение всех функций разнородных стейкхолдеров на регулярной основе может быть слишком ресурсозатратным, а у потенциальных членов кооператива может не быть достаточных компетенций для решения всех задач. Во-первых, статья дополняет существующие объяснения непривлекательности кооперативной модели для российских фермеров. Во-вторых, исследование показывает взаимосвязь между кооперативной теорией стейкхолдеров и теорией кооперативной организации, предложенной Иваном Емельяновым (1995) в его новаторской работе «Экономическая теория кооперации». В-третьих, исследование по-новому обосновывает гибридную природу кооперации. Статья начинается с короткой методологической справки — описания теории стейкхолдеров применительно к изучению кооперативных организаций; далее следует обзор основных исследовательских подходов к объяснению несостоятельности кооперативного движения в российском сельском хозяйстве, раздел о противоречиях между кооперативной теорией стейкхолдеров и интересами фермеров, и раздел о возможных путях преодоления подобных противоречий. Автор полагает, что нужны новые формы организации бизнеса, представляющие собой компромисс между идеальной фирмой и идеальным кооперативом. Эти новые формы помогут фермерам получать выгоду от сотрудничества без формального участия в кооперативах.

Ключевые слова: кооператив, теория стейкхолдеров, платформа, неоднородность стейкхолдеров