

THE PROSPECTS OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLICS**

Abstract. *The neoliberal approach taken to the transition from socialism to capitalism in the six former Yugoslav republics has revealed its weaknesses in all spheres of economic activities, including food production. These countries have lost sovereignty with respect to regulating important national policy areas like food trade and production. Liberalisation of the food trade has adversely affected national economies by destroying many small-scale farmers and food producers. Corporate supermarkets have been taking over an ever bigger slice of the retail pie. Social movements are calling for direct democratic control over resources and food production to be regained. The article examines the prospects of these countries to overcome the increasing food insecurity by introducing food sovereignty.*

Keywords: *former Yugoslav republics, food sovereignty, food security, right to food, economic democracy, trade liberalisation*

Introduction

A recent study by Brankov and Lovre (2017) indicates that five out of the six former Yugoslav republics are vulnerable to food insecurity.¹ Compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia,² Slovenia is the most food-secure country. The increasing food insecurity is a cause for concern. This gloomy trend has surprised many because

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¹ Food insecurity is a situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power, the inappropriate distribution or inadequate use of food on the household level. Food insecurity may be chronic, seasonal or transitory (FAO, 2000: 26).

² Data related to Serbia are related to its territory without the province Kosovo and Metohija under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

it happens in countries with a successful agri-food production experience, considerable potential, rich natural resources and excellent climate conditions for agricultural production, livestock breeding and fishery. The former Yugoslavia had in place developed agriculture production and its citizens enjoyed full access to sufficient, affordable and healthy food. Yet, how has it happened that, after 30 years of transitioning from socialism to capitalism, the people in the mentioned former republics are faced with food insecurity?

Although the states that became independent after the breaking up of Yugoslavia are currently in different development phases, they implemented the same transitional structural adjustment programme. They share the same challenges with respect to political and economic reforms and are comparable in terms of their European Union (EU) accession process. On 1 May 2004, Slovenia was the first of the ex-Yugoslav republics to join the EU. Croatia has been an EU member country since 1 July 2013. Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are officially candidates, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential one.³ All of these countries have signed Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) with the EU, which provide for political and economic cooperation and the establishment of free-trade areas. The accession process includes adjustments to agricultural policy and conformity with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Among these countries, only Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are not members of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The six states arising from former Yugoslavia abandoned the previous socialist regime based on social ownership, socially-and state-owned companies, the state-driven economy, and the self-management of the working class. Deregulation, privatisation, liberalisation and marketisation were the main pillars of the deep structural reforms aimed at building capitalism. Streaming towards integration into both the EU and the WTO led to the opening up of markets and the replacing of socialist regulation and state planning with open trade and competition. The economic transition included changes in the agriculture sector. The process was based on harmonisation with the EU's CAP that has reshaped the national food economies. Countries made use of the multiannual IPA rural development programme (IPARD), an instrument the EU developed to ease agricultural and rural development in pre-accession countries. The reforms implemented in the agriculture sector were expected to create a favourable ambience for a market economy and increase the competitiveness and efficiency in business activities.

Yet, very soon these expectations proved to be unmet. The implemented neoliberal approach demonstrated its weaknesses in all economic spheres,

³ *The EU has also granted Kosovo (under the UNSCR 1244/1999) potential candidate status and signed Stabilisation and Association Agreements with it.*

including food production (Stipetić, 2005; Čavrak, 2003; Hodžić, 2007; Pejanović, 2009; Marović, 2016; Luketina et al., 2018). The national food system's capacity to ensure sustainable food security is seriously threatened by irresponsible 'business-as-usual' activities that jeopardise food safety and give rise to environmental problems (Dokmanović, 2017; Popadić Nikolić and Milenković, 2019). These countries are experiencing rapid land concentration, in turn adversely affecting the livelihoods of small-scale farmers, the development of rural communities, and the sustainable production of food for all (Petrović, 2019: 5–6; Srećković, 2013). As a result of both trade liberalisation and the globalisation process, imported food and processed agricultural products have come to dominate the supermarket shelves in all of these countries.

Such negative trends have affected the rural population. There is an ongoing trend of employment falling in agriculture across all ex-Yugoslav republics (Table 1: Total population, rural population, total, employment in agriculture (%) And agriculture value added per worker (constant USD), 1997–2017.). In their study on small farms' access to land, Bedrač, Bele, Cunder and Kožar (2019: 11) found that the access of poor and small-holding farmers to formal credits are weaker compared to farmers who have bigger farms or agricultural companies. Small-holding farmers often do not have a permanent and sufficiently high income, making them seen as riskier bank clients. This means their farms' development is impeded, their competitiveness is reduced and social inequalities are rising. Jobs in the agricultural sector are typically low-paid, if paid at all, like for many family members involved in farming. The informal work rate is particularly high in agriculture. In Serbia and North Macedonia, two-thirds of informal work is concentrated in this sector (World Bank Group and Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, 2018: 15).

Many rural people, especially the young and educated, migrate abroad, mainly to EU countries, in response to growing unemployment, poverty, and social inequality (Malaj and Malaj, 2017). This mass brain drain is jeopardising not only rural and agricultural development, but the prosperity and future of the entire region. Membership in the EU would not end – and could even exacerbate – emigration, as may be seen by developments in Croatia where the overall level of emigration doubled after EU accession (Vratic, 2018). This trend has led to a continuing decline in the rural population, as well as its ageing, rapid desertification, and the disappearance of villages and abandonment of huge swathes of agricultural land.⁴

⁴ Government of the Republic of Croatia. *Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia (2014–2020)*.

Table 1: TOTAL POPULATION, RURAL POPULATION, TOTAL, EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE (%) AND AGRICULTURE VALUE ADDED PER WORKER (CONSTANT USD), 1997–2017.

Country	Year	Population, total (million)	Rural population, total (million)	Employment in agriculture (%)	Agric. value added per worker (constant USD)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1997	3.7	2.2	19.3	n/a
	2007	3.8	2.1	18.1	6,075
	2017	3.3	1.8	16.6	6,312
Croatia	1997	4.5	2.1	17.8	6,547
	2007	4.4	2,0	12.4	10,815
	2017	4.2	1.8	7.0	15,731
Montenegro	1997	n/a	n/a	9.9	n/a
	2007	0.6	0.2	8.7	16,380
	2017	0.6	0.2	7.9	21,193
North Macedonia	1997	2.0	0.8	24.7	6,019
	2007	2.1	0.9	18.2	8,113
	2017	2.1	0.9	16.2	6,635
Serbia	1997	n/a	n/a	25.1	4,749
	2007	9.1	4.2	20.8	4,512
	2017	8.8	3.8	17.2	5,876
Slovenia	1997	2.0	1.0	12.1	8,218
	2007	2.0	1.0	9.9	9,154
	2017	2.1	0.9	5.6	17,704

Source: Authors' compilation based on FAOSTAT Data. Accessible at <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data>, 12. 12. 2021.

The burning question is how to reverse these unfavourable trends. The economic turbulences that are expected to deepen due to the COVID-19 pandemic make this issue urgent and vital for people in the region. According to the OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2020–2029 report (OECD-FAO, 2020), the pandemic is expected to depress demand in the next few years and could further undermine food security. The official rural development and economic policy responses in these countries do not foresee any change with respect to the current corporate food regime. This means a worsening of the position of domestic small-scale food producers and farmers is inevitable if no step is taken to put human rights and people's needs in the centre of policies.

The aim of this article is to analyse the prospects of introducing food sovereignty in the former Yugoslav republics as an alternative way of transcending the present difficulties. This issue has not been explored by researchers thus far.

Ever since the World Food Summit in 1996 and the World Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2007, more and more countries have embraced food sovereignty as an alternative to the market-oriented and corporation-driven production of food. Food sovereignty is an idea developed by La Via Campesina, a global alliance of peasants and other rural people, as a substitute for the concept of food security. In view of the failure of neoliberal policies and the deteriorating living conditions in both urban and rural societies, the alliance, along with other similar social movements (Friends of the Earth International, the World March of Women, the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, and the Network of Farmers Producers Organisations of West Africa), argues that hunger and poverty have primarily not been eradicated because the principle of food security does not work. The global advocacy of this movement resulted in the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas in December 2018.⁵ This document recalls the right of peoples to exercise sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources. It recognises that the concept of food sovereignty has been used in many states and regions to designate the right to define their food and agriculture systems, and the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect human rights. The Declaration reiterates the basic human rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas, such as the right to life, physical and mental integrity, liberty, and security of person (Article 6.1).

In some countries, mainly in Latin America and Africa, the food sovereignty movements have been able to implement their 'bottom-up' approach in the state's agricultural policy. To date, the concept has been integrated into legislation and sectoral strategies in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Honduras, Peru, Mexico, Cuba and Guatemala. Ecuador, Bolivia, Nepal and Egypt have even introduced this concept into their constitutions (Dokmanović, 2020). The new model is associated with many success stories, particularly with respect to decreasing poverty and the conservation of biodiversity (Chappell et al., 2013). The movement is not only emerging in developing countries, but in the most developed countries as well like Canada (Food Secure Canada, 2015), the United States of America (US Food Sovereignty Alliance, 2021) and Switzerland (European Coordination Via Campesina, 2018: 27).

This article explores whether the UN's support for food sovereignty and good foreign practices has impacts on the governments and social movements in the former Yugoslav republics. The specificity of these six states is

⁵ UNGA (United Nations General Assembly), *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*, UNGA, 73rd Session, UN Doc. A/RES/73/165 (17 December 2018).

that they share the same past with respect to growing up under a very specific form of socialist system based on solidarity and the self-management of working class and small-scale producers. Workers, employees and farmers in former Yugoslavia exercised a type of local economic democracy in the form of self-management and cooperatives. Production, including in agriculture, was planned and directed by the state chiefly based on the population's needs. Our research focuses on the following issues:

- How have governments, food producer alliances, and civil society in these countries responded to the concept of food sovereignty?
- What are the prospects of this concept being introduced in these countries?
- Which obstacles and opportunities exist in relation to this?

The article has five sections. The section following this introduction overviews the conceptual framework of food security and food sovereignty. The third section presents the methodological approach applied while in the fourth section we describe the research findings. In the last section, we discuss the findings and consider the prospects of implementing the food sovereignty concept in the former Yugoslav republics.

Conceptual framework: food security vs. food sovereignty

The food security concept has seen (almost) continuous development since the 1974 World Food Conference in Rome where governments examined the global problem of food production and consumption and proclaimed that "Every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop fully and maintain their physical and mental faculties".⁶ Food security has been promoted by the FAO, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the World Bank, and most food aid programmes. The concept is oriented to the development of technology, industrial agriculture and the agrochemical industry, which provides 'inputs' like fertilisers, pesticides, seeds etc. as solutions to increase the productivity and efficiency of agricultural production (Petrović, 2019: 5-6).

However, this model is problematic for both environmental and economic reasons. Ruiz-Almeida and Rivera-Ferre (2019) stress that agri-food systems are essential not only in achieving food security, but for ensuring both social and environmental sustainability. The existing frameworks for defining and assessing food systems sustainability often lack the political dimension in analysis of their outcomes. The food security approach to the food crisis is highly neoliberal in nature, and promotes further liberalisation, borrowing, and agricultural aid tied to GMOs and "bio-fortified/climate-resistant" crops

⁶ United Nations, *Report on the World Food Conference, Rome 5-16 November 1974*, New York. Accessible at <https://www.un.org/en/development/devagenda/food.shtml>, 05. 08. 2019.

(Holt-Giménez, 2010: 3). It supports a trade- and market-oriented model for production, which neglects its negative impacts on sustainability, the environment, fertile land, water, forests, local ecosystems, and cultural traditions. It enables the growth of corporate monopoly power in food systems, which rules over the entire food production chain, from production to distribution. As a result of the concentration of monopolies, nowadays less than 50 corporations control the bulk of the global production and trade of food, seeds and agrochemicals (Agrifood Atlas, 2017). Only a handful of internationally operating finance groups determine which crops and livestock are grown. The Agrifood Atlas (2017) shows that their fight for market share comes at the expense of the weakest links in the chain: farmers and workers. Through its market mechanisms and overproduction, food security has contributed to dependence on the modernist industrial model of agriculture, which, in turn, is undermining the livelihoods of small-scale producers and generating new inequalities (Trauger, 2015: 4). In this model, the state is a vehicle for promoting and continuing certain agricultural practices that nearly always work for the benefit of corporations. A study by Cini, Rosaneli and Cunha (2018) proved that the concentration of land, the means of production, and capital hold consequences for the inequities of populations and their health, without regard to environmental sustainability. The key differences between these two concepts are presented in Table 2 (Food security vs. food sovereignty).

Table 2: FOOD SECURITY VS. FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

	Corporate food regime	Social food movements
DISCOURSE	Food security	Food sovereignty
FOOD	Commodity of trade	Human right
ORIENTATION	Development of the industrial agriculture	Entitlement of people
AIM	To increase productivity and efficiency and secure enough food for the global population	To protect people's right to food
MODEL	Development of technology and related agrochemical industry which provides fertilisers, seeds, pesticides etc.; mainstreaming/certification of niche markets (e.g. organic, fair, local sustainable); maintaining northern agricultural subsidies; based on large-scale production	Dismantle corporate agri-foods' monopoly power; parity; community rights to water and seed; regionally-based food systems; democratisation of the food system; protection against overproduction/dumping; agroecology; regulated markets and supply; based on smallholdings and sustainable food production models which are in harmony with local ecosystems

	Corporate food regime	Social food movements
PROMOTED BY	FAO; World Bank, UN Commission for Sustainable Development; IMF; most food banks and food aid programmes	La Via Campesina, International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty, Global March for Women; global, regional and national food justice and rights-based movements
APPROACH TO THE FOOD CRISIS	Same as the neoliberal, but with increased medium farmer production and some locally-sourced food aid; more agricultural aid but tied to GMOs and “bio-fortified/ climate resistant” crops	Human right to food sovereignty; locally-sourced, sustainably- produced, culturally-appropriate, democratically-controlled food
AGRARIAN REFORM	Market-led	Redistributive and just
FARMERS	Land and production capabilities concentrated and governed by corporations and large-scale producers at the expense of small-scale farmers, public health and the environment	Small-scale farmers supported to produce and secure healthy and culturally-appropriate food
THE STATE	Minimal involvement, except when required by large-scale producers	Guarantor of the right to food through direct involvement in agroecological production and protection from external economic forces
SUBSIDIES	Mostly directed to large-scale producers	Directed to small-scale and small-holder farmers, to support sustainable farming practices
GUIDING DOCUMENT	World Bank 2009 Development Report	UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas 2018

Sources: Adapted from Holt-Giménez (2010) and Simón Reardon and Pérez (2010).

Social movements point to food sovereignty as an alternative development model that can counter the problems the concept of food security has failed to respond to; namely, to eradicate hunger, malnutrition, social inequity, and environmental degradation. Supporters of food sovereignty call for a radical change to the corporate food regime based on redistributive reforms, including market, land and water. They seek to open up the food system to serve people and ensure their access to healthy food. Social movements also demand the replacement of existing rights to “food security” with a human right to “food sovereignty”. To this end, efforts have been made to institutionalise it as a right enshrined in an International Convention on Food Sovereignty (Public Citizen), which has yet to be drafted. Dunford

(2015: 239) links this demand for human rights and food sovereignty with collective emancipation and the development of practices of citizenship that enable people to demand and secure rights for themselves, providing an emancipatory alternative to interventionist politics. Tilzey (2021; 2020) defines this concept as “radical” food sovereignty because it counters hegemony, capitalism, and market dependency as a condition for survival. In his study of the relationship between and the dynamics of capitalism, imperialism and nationalism, undertaken by reference to case studies of Bolivia and Ecuador, he argues that radical food sovereignty is differentially located in the global South because the capitalist “agrarian transition” has not generally taken the form of the full proletarianisation which has characterised the global North (2020: 2).

A study by Edelman and Borras (2021) presents a panoramic overview of transnational agrarian movements and the ongoing importance of peasant politics. Historically, the rise of the food sovereignty transnational populist movements is directly linked with the fall of the post-war international food order, entailing the shifting of the world population away from direct access to food and incorporating it instead into food markets (Friedmann, 1982: 255). In her study of the political economy of food, Harriet Friedmann (1982) argued the international food order of the post-war era had led to the decline of agricultural self-sufficiency and increased poverty in developing countries. Third World states faced the consequence of two decades of the urban masses being formed, all dependent on cheap imported food. On the other side, they encountered increasingly costly food imports on increasingly difficult terms (Friedmann, 1982: 282). Accordingly, they joined together to protest international inequality, with particular strength after the World Food Conference of 1974.

Food sovereignty has also emerged in the centre of scientific discussions on agri-food systems, agrarian policies, agroecology, environmental protection, the right to food, economic democracy, poverty reduction, rural development, and biodiversity conservation, including cross-cutting issues like gender relations, equity and equality. Many authors consider food sovereignty as a specific collective right of communities, states, peoples and regions (Golay, 2018; Claeys, 2012; Claeys, 2014; Claeys, 2015; Groenmeyer, 2013; Dunford, 2015; Holt-Giménez, 2010). Hannah Wittman (2011) accepts the definition of food sovereignty as “the right of local peoples to control their own food systems, including markets, ecological resources, food cultures, and production modes”. Priscilla Claeys (2012: 849) notes that this right contains two dimensions: an internal – “the right of a people to choose its own political, economic and social system, and an external dimension – the right of states to develop their agriculture”. She considers that in many ways “it evokes collective rights already recognized by the UN, such as the

right to self-determination, the right to development and the right to permanent sovereignty over natural resources” (Claeys, 2013:4). Golay (2013: 13) states that food sovereignty can be described as an innovation within the scope of international human rights law, besides the right to seeds, the right to traditional agricultural knowledge and practice, and the right to biological diversity; but “it must be noted that although these rights do not exist as self-standing rights in human rights law, they have been defined – at least partially – as components of already existing rights, such as the right to food”.

A study by Chapell et al. (2013) proves the potential held by food sovereignty for protecting biodiversity and reducing poverty in Latin America. Similarly, based on data from different countries, Pachón-Ariza (2013) argues that this concept shares many topics with rural development, and the main goal of both is to improve the quality of life of peasants, the indigenous population and, in general, rural inhabitants. In developed countries, food sovereignty has become a common banner for urban agriculture. In the Swiss context, it typically refers to community-supported agriculture, community garden initiatives, local food policies and urban farms (Mumenthaler, Schweizer and Cavin, 2020). One example of implementing food sovereignty in Ontario, Canada, shows that the paths to this concept in a highly urbanised region in which special industrial farms dominate are complex, yet the potential is considerable (Friedmann, 2012).

As elaborated above, food sovereignty is strongly linked with the protection and fulfilment of other human rights, not simply economic, social, and cultural rights, but political and civil rights, environmental rights and the right to development, as well as a number of new rights like the rights to seeds and to biological diversity (Dokmanović, 2019). This means food sovereignty may be considered as a specific, complex and overarching right that is indispensable for the exercise of other rights of people working and living in rural areas (Golay, 2018).

Methodological approach

First, we performed desk research to compile relevant national strategies, policy papers, reports, studies and other documents from sources like statistical offices, relevant ministries, associations of peasants and small-scale farmers, researchers, and civil society organisations (CSOs). Statistical databases of the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) were used for comparison as well as complementary data on the population, sectoral employment, poverty, and food consumer prices. The analysis was based on available data and mostly includes the 20-year period from 1997 to 2017.

We subjected the collected data, statistics and policies to quantitative and qualitative analysis to explore the state of play and the trends related to our research questions. We also analysed governmental and non-governmental attitudes to the concept of food sovereignty. Based on the findings, we assessed the prospects, obstacles and opportunities regarding introduction of the food sovereignty concept in the near future in the countries under observation.

Results

Policy responses to key challenges in the food sector

A study of development characteristics of the region's agriculture sector (Nikolić et al., 2017: 275–293) shows the most prominent problem in this sector is the “disclosure of large agricultural enterprises, demesne fragmentation and insufficient cooperation of small farmers, internal markets became unstable and non-regulated, strengthening of monopolies and occurrence of illegal trade, import of cheap agricultural products due to liberalization of foreign trade and, finally, inadequate and insufficient financial and credit support from the government”. Implementation of the SAAs has exposed domestic agri-food producers to stronger import competition. Instead of enhancing domestic food producers' competitiveness, food trade liberalisation has adversely affected national economies by destroying many small-scale farmers and producers, making it impossible for them to compete against imported foodstuffs, whose prices are generally far below the actual costs of domestic food production. The level of technical and technological equipment of small farms and fragmented holdings is low, resources are insufficiently utilised and production costs thus are higher. Compounding this is the fact that levels of state schemes for direct and indirect producer support remain low.

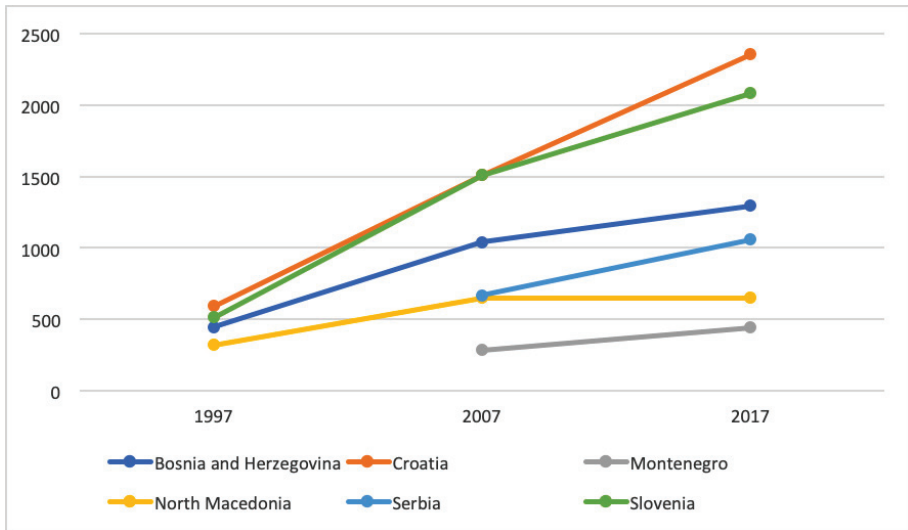
Liberalisation has also served multinational corporations' and foreign food supermarket chains' entry into these countries with cheap foodstuffs and their holding of monopolist positions. This process has exacerbated the bankruptcy of domestic private and state-owned companies due to macro-economic policies based on fostering competitiveness, free market and foreign investments at the cost of domestic production. The top 50 hypermarkets and supermarkets ranked on the global level accounted for 40.1% of overall channel sales in 2017 (Research and Markets, 2019), with many having entered the region. For example, in 2018 Serbia had 2,845 active retail stores with food and beverages predominating; the smallest traditional stores accounted for around 63% while 3% represented the largest trading format (Republic of Serbia, Commission for Protection of Competition, 2019). The share of the top 10 undertakings by revenue in 2018 was 58%

of total estimated revenues, that is, a rise of four percentage points over 2017. The top 3 undertakings by revenue are foreign retail chains, Delhaize (Belgium), Mercator (Croatia)⁷ and Lidl (Germany). In Croatia, the top 10 grocery retailers achieved a total revenue of EUR 3.72 billion, holding 82.1% of the market share (European Supermarket Magazine, 2017). Four of the top 10 grocery retailers are foreign hypermarket chains (Lidl – Germany, Kaufland – Germany, Spar – the Netherlands and Billa – Austria). Similarly, in Slovenia six grocery retailers hold 87.4% of the market share, with five being foreign (Mercator – Croatia, Spar – the Netherlands, Hofer – Germany, Lidl – Germany and Eurospin – Italy). The food industry was not adequately prepared for competition, and Slovenia is still struggling due to the pressure of the growing competition in retail sales (Erjavec et al., 2015: 114). Since a ‘free’ unregulated market favours financial capital and big companies, domestic supermarket chains have rapidly developed into monopolies, with strong impacts for small- and medium-sized agri-food producers (Knežević, 2014: 239–240). McMichael and Friedmann (2007) speak about a “retailing revolution”, arguing that the retail sector has moved beyond its traditional role of food distributors and is now strongly influencing patterns of food production and consumption.

The deregulation and lowering of food safety standards have led to declines in the quality of both imported and domestic foodstuffs. Moreover, despite the rising trend of imports (Figure 3: Food imports (USD million), 1997–2017), food has become more and more expensive (Figure 4: Consumer prices, food indices (2010=100), 2005–2019) and therefore ever less affordable for the impoverished population. Such people face social insecurity, income inequality, unemployment and other forms of social exclusion that jeopardise their access to basic rights, including the right to healthy and affordable food. The UNECE indicator of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 (eradication of poverty) shows that the share of the population below the national poverty line is still high (Figure 5: SD goal 1: proportion of the population below the national poverty line, %, 2007–2017). In Serbia and Montenegro, every fourth citizen is below the national poverty line. In Croatia, around 20% of the population may be classed as poor. One slightly positive trend here is noticeable in North Macedonia where the share of the population living in poverty dropped from 27% in 2010 to 22.2% in 2017. The country with the fewest people living in poverty is Slovenia, at half the level in the other countries. However, this EU member state experienced a noteworthy tendency of ever more impoverished people, from 12.3% in 2004 to 14.3% in 2014. Poverty rates in the country’s rural

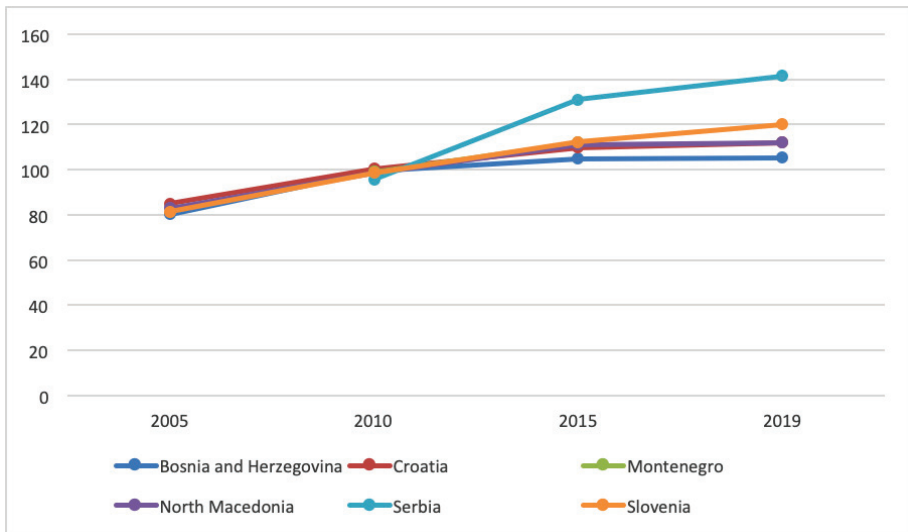
⁷ Mercator is a Slovenian multinational retail corporation owned since 2013 by the Croatian company Agrokor, which in 2019 was transformed into the Fortenova Group.

Figure 3: FOOD IMPORTS (USD MILLION), 1997–2017



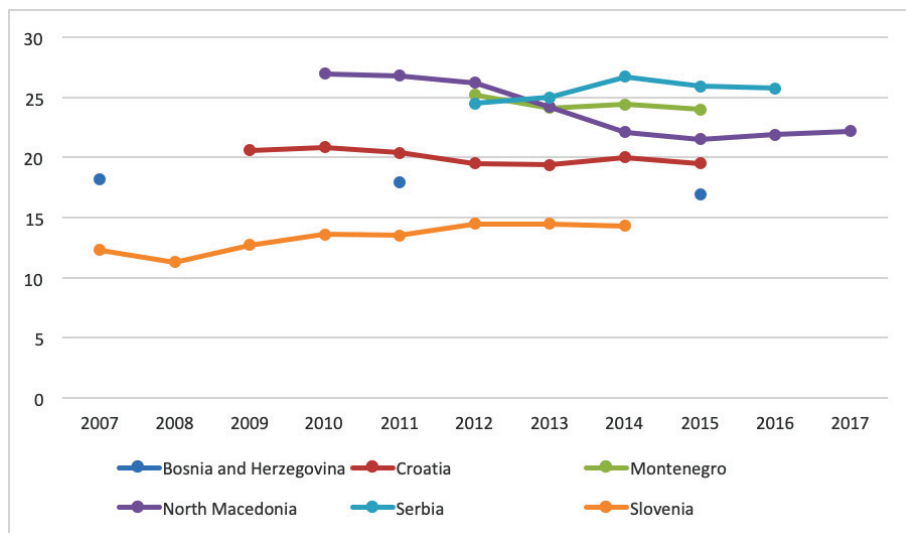
Source: Authors' compilation based on FAOSTAT Data. Accessible at <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data>, 12. 12. 2021.

Figure 4: CONSUMER PRICES, FOOD INDICES (2010=100), 2005–2019



Source: Authors' compilation based on FAOSTAT Data. Accessible at <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data>, 12. 12. 2021.

Figure 5: SD GOAL 1: PROPORTION OF THE POPULATION BELOW THE NATIONAL POVERTY LINE, %, 2007–2017



Source: Authors' compilation based on the UNECE Statistical Database. Accessible at https://www.uncece.org/stats/stats_h.html, 10. 6. 2020.

areas are significantly higher than in urban surroundings (Koczan, 2016). Rural areas continue to house more than half the country's poor in Serbia and Croatia (World Bank, 2020). Among the rural population exposed to the risks of poverty and social exclusion one may find specific groups deemed particularly vulnerable, including women, the elderly, people with disabilities, the young, and low-skilled workers. Consequently, these marginalised groups encounter problems enjoying many human rights, including the right to healthy and affordable food.

All ex-Yugoslav republics, both EU members and non-EU members, have developed long- and medium-term policy documents aligned to EU requirements, with governments having adopted new strategic documents and national action plans for agriculture and rural development (Volk et al., 2019: 23–25). They share certain key strategic goals in this sector given that they primarily focus on strengthening competitiveness, harmonising the legal and policy framework with the EU's requirements, and gradual approximation to the EU's CAP. Countries aspiring to EU membership are not afforded the freedom to formulate and design their policies autonomously beyond the limits imposed by the EU's non-negotiable requirements. These conditions indicate that "the EU is uninterested in democracy unless the democratic process leads to expansion of international trade and harmonisation with the existing rules of trade"; within this context, the accession process

for any potential future member states “leaves no room for citizen participation in food policy development” (Knežević, 2014: 239–240). EU membership requirements related to establishing a free-market economy and adoption of the *acquis* overshadow the requirements related to democracy and human rights. A recent comparative cross-country analysis of the current harmonisation of Western Balkan countries’ agricultural policies and the CAP (Erjavec et al., 2020) shows these countries do not have the power to impose their own preferences concerning the accession requirements. Yet, the analysis also shows that, due to the uncertain date of EU accession and the changing nature of the CAP, the countries are designing their future agricultural policy in line with the CAP requirements, while in practice they implement types of policies which are optimal from the domestic political economy perspective.

For non-EU member countries, approximation to the EU’s CAP would not improve the situation. The CAP requirements do not necessarily amount to the optimal policy choice from the local perspective (Erjavec et al., 2020: 24). Besides, it has been proven that the CAP policy often fails small farms in the EU. Research by Guth et al. (2020) and Matthews (2016) shows the distribution of the CAP’s support has favoured the largest farms, increasing disparities within the sector. This uneven distribution of support led to an increase in income disparity among small, medium-sized and large agricultural holdings in the EU (Guth et al., 2020: 11). As these authors conclude, the existing solutions within the CAP help to achieve economic sustainability, defined by the parity of agricultural to non-agricultural income, yet do not reduce the income disparity within the agricultural sector. The example of Slovenia reveals that ever since it joined the EU its agricultural income has greatly depended on direct support and that this dependence has become a weakness of Slovenian agriculture (Erjavec et al., 2015: 114). Further, exporters were not able to keep pace with the significant increase in imports, causing the external market deficit to double. Lovec and Erjavec (2017) demonstrate that over time the CAP’s focus has shifted from market distortions to international trade and budgetary decision-making frameworks, as well as broader societal issues.

We found that not a single national strategic document in the observed countries addresses food production as a basis for securing for its population enjoyment of the right to adequate and quality food as enshrined in key international human rights instruments. Improving the quality and safety of food products is envisaged solely as a measure for enhancing their marketability, as for instance defined in the Strategic Plan for Rural Development of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018–2021).⁸

⁸ Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Strategic Plan for Rural Development of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018–2021) – Framework Document*.

The respective national strategies do, however, target improving the quality of life in rural areas as a strategic goal. A major caveat here is that the anticipated measures are fragmented and overly general, such as supporting promotion of the diversification of economic activities in rural areas, improving the age and educational structure of the rural population, and improving the status of women and young people. Still, these fragmented measures might have only a limited and scarce impact because they do not tackle what causes the problems. The core of the policy orientation remains fostering the neoliberalisation that has been at the root of the deteriorating economic and social position of the rural population and exacerbation of their declining quality of life. With respect to enabling the participation of farmers in shaping policy, an example of good practice is found only in the Slovenian Rural Development Programme for 2014–2020. It supports community-led local development following the ‘bottom-up approach’. This approach seeks to enable local people, by forming local partnerships of ‘local action groups’, to actively participate in decision-making on priority tasks and development objectives of the local area, including financial services, to meet the local area’s objectives. Unlike this Slovenian solution, the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for 2014–2024 does not include any option to facilitate the active participation of small-scale farmers and local communities in decision-making. The concept of agricultural cooperatives is neglected, even though in former Yugoslavia these proved to be one of the major instruments of rural development as a basic organisational form of business association and collectivisation for farmers (Nestorov-Bizonj, Koveljanić and Erdelji, 2015).

The common characteristic of the national rural development strategies in the region is that they fail to critically analyse the status and trends in the national economy and rural areas, and the effects of implementation of the transition policies on the current difficulties and challenges. The main aim is to match the national legal and policy framework with the EU’s requirements and the *acquis*. Therefore, implementation has been – and will remain – merely a technical matter, as a simple *to-do list* the EU expects to be fulfilled, instead of a critical rethinking and adjustment of the implemented economic model to the specificities, needs and interests of local rural communities and the national economy, safeguarding basic political, social and economic rights.

The strategies have hitherto focused on targeting EU requirements, yet have very often failed to include measures proven to effectively enhance food production and the position of farmers. For example, the Serbian Strategy for rural development considers the large number of small-scale

producers as an “obstacle to the intensive development of production”.⁹ Numerous examples from the Nordic countries, Austria, Italy, Switzerland as well as other developed countries where small farms and small manufacturers comprise significant shares of the market of certain products dispel this myth that small-scale producers have no place in the market (Šimleša, 2019). They are effective precisely because they collaborate through numerous cooperatives. In Serbia, almost half of all agricultural farms operate on less than two hectares of land. Such farms are most prone to disappearing under the burden of economic and political regulations. Šimleša (2019: 44) noted that this type of treatment is absurd given that, on the global level, small farms produce 70% of all food consumed. Knežević (2014: 229) argues that no space has been afforded for food security concerns, and that the lack of formal channels for achieving food security and food sovereignty “has inadvertently contributed to a subversive food economy that escapes formal control of transnational capital”.

Governments in the region have clearly failed to show any interest in considering the food sovereignty concept as an option. All of the countries abstained from voting on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, apart from Serbia. While this country voted in favour of the document, so far no step has been taken to implement it.

Responses of farmers, consumers and civil society

In all of the countries under observation, a broad range of civic society organisations (CSOs) is active that promote sustainable rural development and rural entrepreneurship, environmental protection, advocating against GMO food and seeds, land grabbing and harmful agricultural practices, and protecting the rights of rural people. However, food sovereignty has not been in the centre of their activities thus far. Only two studies on this issue have hitherto been produced. Both studies were initiated and produced by the Serbian Ama Centre for the Care of People and Nature in 2019. Petrović (2019) explored the concept of food sovereignty in the Serbian context and critically analysed the country’s food production system. The second research was published in partnership with the Croatian Green Network of Activist Groups, ZMAG (Šimleša, 2019). It entails a study of the situation of young farmers in Serbia and Croatia and their attitudes, plans and reasons for becoming a farmer. The study allowed for a comparative analysis of the situation of young farmers in these two countries and the current state

⁹ Government of the Republic of Serbia. *Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia from 2014–2024*. (“Official Gazette of RS”, no. 85/2014)

and position of young farmers in the EU. Both studies concluded that food sovereignty, together with agroecology and solidary cooperatives, are key methods for transforming the entire agricultural policy and system of goods and improving farmers' position and the healthiness of food production.

A new initiative for introducing food sovereignty recently emerged in Croatia. In April 2020, 50 rural and countryside tourism associations launched the Food Sovereignty Initiative (Hina, 2020). These associations advocate a food-sovereign state and promote local food production, short supply chains and green markets because these have proven to be particularly important during the COVID-19 crisis. They demand radical changes to agricultural policy, convinced that wrong policies are responsible for food production's 30-year regression and the disappearance of numerous family farms.

National Networks for Rural Development operate in all of the observed countries and cooperate on the European level. They are members of the European Rural Parliament, working to express the voice of rural people in Europe (European Rural Parliament), and are partners in the running of the PREPARE - Partnership for Rural People Network (PREPARE). Through these two European networks, the national Networks for Rural Development are active in advocating a Rural Agenda for Europe and supporting the demands summarised in the Rural People's Declaration of Candás Asturias adopted in November 2019 (European Rural Parliament, 2019). This Declaration does not specifically call for food sovereignty, but for participatory and inclusive cooperation and partnerships between local people and decision-makers on all levels. These demands are also supported by Friends of the Earth Europe, the biggest grassroots environmental network in Europe that includes associations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Slovenia (Friends of Earth Europe, 2020). They are also active in promoting food sovereignty as the right of people to define their own food and agriculture policies.

The National Networks for Rural Development are active in the European rural social movement which has developed legislative proposals for the post-2020 CAP reform that is to support small family farms (La Via Campesina, 2019). The movement has proposed instruments that include market regulation to ensure fair prices for farmers and sustainable production levels, targeted subsidies and support, and a new trade model which puts livelihood and food sovereignty at its core. The European Rural Parliament, representing rural people, networks and associations from 38 countries, including the former Yugoslav republics, has also called for a real Rural Agenda for Europe, considering that the dominant urban and growth agendas, combined with the disconnection between local people and decision-makers, pose a threat to rural life. Thus far, the EU has adopted several

resolutions¹⁰ calling for EU trade and development policies to respect the political and economic space of developing countries, including food sovereignty.¹¹

Discussion

We have observed that the neoliberal policy approach to the agricultural and food sectors is the biggest challenge in all of the countries under study because food is primarily considered as a commodity within a trade- and market-oriented model for production. Fostering marketisation, monopolisation and imports of food produced by local small-scale food producers and farmers adversely impact not only their economic and social position but the local agri-food production as well. Health concerns have come to the fore in the wake of the decrease in national regulation concerning control over the quality of imported food.

Consequently, consumers tend to buy food from local producers, given that domestic food is healthier than the imported foodstuffs being sold in the big supermarket chains. The consumption of local food benefits local producers and consumers alike. In contrast, a food system dominated by large agri-food corporations is based on long-distance trade. Foodstuffs are transported thousands of kilometres from the field to the table and thus need to contain many preservatives and chemicals, which increase health risks.

Corporate supermarkets take revenue away from the traditional and local food system and out of the hands of peasants, small-scale producers, and traders. They thereby take control over what people eat and how that food is produced. Moreover, there are cases of brand takeover of traditionally produced food by corporations and big companies. For example, local producers of the traditional famous cheese from the Croatian island of Pag, *Pag's cheese* (in Croatian/Serbian/Bosnian: *paški sir*), complain that they have been forced to stop producing this cheese because the brand certificate was given to a large company which produces and sells the cheese under its original name, even though it disregards the traditional recipe (Šikić, 2020).

Governments and chambers of commerce in the region have become aware of these challenges and the worsening position held by local food

¹⁰ European Parliament Resolution of 5 October 2016 on the next steps towards attaining global goals and EU commitments on nutrition and food security in the world (2016/2705(RSP)); European Parliament Resolution of 7 June 2016 on the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (2015/2277(INI)); FAO World Summit on Food Security European Parliament resolution of 26 November 2009 on the FAO Summit and food security (2009)0102.

¹¹ However, almost no policy changes have been made thus far.

producers. However, their policy responses have focused on promoting campaigns to support local produce and producers such as “Let’s buy domestic!” (Tumanovska and Heil, 2020; Katana, 2009; Nikolić, 2015; Agronews, 2017; Croatian Chamber of Commerce, 2020) and introducing new trademarks to promote locally-produced goods like “The Housekeeper – Made in Serbia” (Serbian Chamber of Commerce, 2020). Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have tried to oblige retailers to place at least 50% domestically produced food on their shelves. Yet, although they are not EU members, the countries were forced by the EU to withdraw their ‘protectionist’ regulation. In Slovenia, Erjavec et al. (2015: 114) observed that domestic consumers remain loyal to Slovenian food, but this traditional connection is slowly weakening due to the pressure from retail sales.

The effects of the rising trend of economic patriotism are hard to detect because most consumers in a food store look at the price tag rather than the country of origin label. For example, the German supermarket chain Lidl took 3% of the total market share after operating in Serbia for only 2 months due to low prices at the expense of quality (Bukvić, 2018). Impoverished people look for the cheapest food they can find, which as a rule is imported. This has seen corporate supermarkets take over an ever greater slice of the retail pie, while small-scale local producers, groceries and farmers have been forced to abandon their businesses, orchards and fields. Rural areas are experiencing depopulation and the disappearance of farms and jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the advantages of proximity agriculture, which is linked with proximity consumption; in other words, with the consumption of local food produced by farmers close (both geographically and culturally) to the location of consumption. During the lockdown in Serbia (March–May 2020), many small-scale food producers and groceries opened up online markets and offered home delivery to link with consumers in urban areas forced to stay home for most of the day, 48 hours or even longer. Similar initiatives were seen in the other countries too. The situation caused by the pandemic led to consumers’ rising awareness of the significance of local food and proximity agriculture as well as the dangers of being dependent on imported food.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we estimate that the prospects of food sovereignty being introduced in the ex-Yugoslav region in the near future are poor due to the lack of political consideration and the weak social movements. The national rural development and economic policies in the observed countries do not foresee any retreat from the current corporate food regime and the food security discourse. The human right to food and the position held by small-scale

food producers are not in the focus of the policies. The food sovereignty concept has yet to be considered, also in Serbia which voted in favour of adopting the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. The biggest obstacles to embracing this alternative model of development are the lack of economic sovereignty, the fostering of macro-economic policy based of 'free' trade and 'open' markets, and the renunciation of considerable amounts of sovereignty in favour of the EU.

Nevertheless, governments in the region are aware of the unfavourable trends that threaten agriculture, rural development, and people's access to healthy and affordable food. To counter these tendencies and stimulate domestic food production, they are supporting economic patriotism yet that does not work because the majority of people are forced to look for the cheapest food, which typically is imported.

Peasants, farmers, food producers, small-scale retailers, consumers, environmentalists and citizens in the observed states are also aware of these challenges. However, they have scarce possibilities of participating in decision-making and democratic control over food, water, land, and other resources. Their associations are hardly influential while the food sovereignty movement in the region is still weak. Still, some opportunities are emerging that are favourable for the introduction of food sovereignty thanks to the activities of the National Networks for Rural Development. The experience of the Latin American countries and other states that have already integrated food sovereignty into their legislation shows this was the result of the long-term advocacy efforts of civil society movements. Therefore, if the European social movement for food sovereignty can succeed in imposing its demands on Brussels, the small states on the semi-periphery that follow the EU's policies, such as the former Yugoslav republics, would also benefit.

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