

The Quiet Privatisation of Agriculture in Belarus. Undermining the State Control

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Abstract

The article deals with the unexpected consequences of a quiet, unintended privatisation of the agriculture sector in Belarus. The sector, totally state-controlled in the Soviet era seemingly retained much of its ownership structure with dominant position of the state. Yet, at least since 2014 crisis and subsequent decrease in the volume of state subsidies, the sector has been undergoing profound transformation, with the scale of private ownership growing. While the process has not yet led to radical economic changes, it is leaving mark in social and political dimensions of Belarusian society.

Keywords: privatisation, agriculture, state control of economy, Belarus

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Introduction

The drastic decrease in subsidies that followed the 2014 crisis has shaken the positions of state-owned enterprises, which have dominated Belarusian agriculture since Stalin's time. Since 2014, they have lost every fourth employee, and many former kolkhozes have gone bankrupt. The result of their extinction in the poorest eastern regions of Belarus was a threefold increase in the number of private farmers. Larger market-based enterprises are also acquiring the land formerly owned by state-owned farms. Newly established private enterprises have yet to play a significant role in Belarusian agriculture. Small farms have an average of just four employees. They are more a means of self-employment for people who do not want to move to the cities.

If the return of private farmers has not yet led to radical economic changes, it can have significant social and political effects. For the first time in 90 years, a significant proportion of land in Belarus is being farmed by private entrepreneurs. Private companies and individual farmers have the potential to spread models of individualism, responsible work, and entrepreneurship. In other words, they are slowly destroying the paternalism and passivity nurtured for decades in Soviet *kolkhozes*.

The effects of Lukashenka's thirty year experiment in maintaining state ownership in agriculture have been dramatic. Under the former *sovkhos* director, the Belarusian countryside has lost 40% of its population. Lukashenka's way of justifying his authoritarian rule is largely based on the ideas and stereotypes widespread among the rural population. However, this kolkhoz village mentality is no longer something close, understandable and relevant to the highly urbanised Belarusian society.

The Decline of State Agricultural Enterprises in the Biešankovičy District – A Case Study

Biešankovičy is a locality in the Viciebsk Region in northern Belarus, with a population of 6.9 thousand (Biešankovičy District Executive Committee 2025). It is the administrative centre of the Biešankovičy District, which in 2024 had 13.4 thousand inhabitants (Main Statistical Office of the Viciebsk Region 2024). The average salary that year was 1,636 Belarusian rubles (equivalent to 504 USD), placing the area third among the poorest districts of the Viciebsk Region, itself ranked second

to last in terms of income among all Belarusian regions (Main Statistical Office of the Viciebsk Region 2025).

According to the district's official website, agriculture plays the leading role in its economy. For nearly 90 years—starting with Stalin's collectivisation of 1929–1933 and continuing until the early second decade of the 21st century—state enterprises dominated the sector. However, over the past 10 years, the ownership structure of the district's agricultural enterprises has undergone significant changes. The number of state-owned companies (successors to Soviet *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses*) has almost halved, while the number of private farms has more than doubled. For the first time since Stalin's era, a significant share of farmland is being cultivated by private owners.

In 1988, at the end of the Soviet era, the agricultural sector of the Beshenkovichi District consisted of 19 *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* (Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Byelorussian SSR 1988). In the 1990s, these were transformed into state agricultural enterprises, unitary state-owned enterprises (companies entirely controlled by the state, without shareholder structures), or joint-stock companies with a dominant state shareholding. Changing the legal form did not affect either the way former *kolkhozes* were managed and financed, or the social relations between employees. Joint-stock companies and unitary state enterprises *continued to be managed by directors appointed by the district executive authorities. Their purpose, like in Soviet times, was not to generate profit, but to fulfil government plans for maintaining infrastructure and residents' incomes.*

Profit actually became a problem for directors, as it signalled to district authorities that the enterprise could be burdened with even greater social obligations. Profits were requisitioned, and efficient enterprises were required to support other loss-making organisations. In 2001, the director of one former *kolkhoz* bitterly admitted: *"Today it's more profitable to have debts. If you don't have them, they'll create them for you, by hanging neighbouring unprofitable farms around your neck"* (Gulyaeva 2001).

As in the Soviet era, the prosperity of state agricultural enterprises depended on the lobbying skills of their directors—that is, their ability to attract subsidies, obtain new equipment, and secure funding for new farms, production plants, and repair workshops (Rychard 1993 :14). The return on these investments (or lack thereof) was usually not considered. The state continued to buy agricultural products at artificially low prices, preventing former *kolkhozes* from earning enough to sustain themselves (Yegorov 2013: 79). Financial losses were offset by numerous subsidies for fuel, fertilisers, and electricity, as well as cheap loans that state banks did not even require to be repaid (Babicki 2003: 692).

Dependent on state aid, enterprises could not afford to pay decent wages. Workers lacked motivation and displayed low labour discipline. Despite the name change, *kolkhozes* remained centres of poverty and mismanagement.

After the fall of communism, the Biešankovičy District — like the rest of the country — saw the emergence of the first farmers who took land on long-term leases. However, they had no access to better-quality land, were forced to sell their products at low state-set prices, and could not benefit from subsidies or cheap loans granted to *kolkhozes*. In addition, they paid taxes several times higher (Akhramovich et al. 2015:11). Therefore, despite the chronic inefficiency of state agricultural enterprises, private farmers could not compete with them.

Simply entering into competition with state enterprises attracted the attention of the authorities and brought problems upon farmers, since the authorities' direct mission was to protect state enterprises (Papko 2017:132). By the mid-1990s, after the Lukashenka regime decided to preserve state enterprises at any cost, the number of farmers stopped growing, and for more than 20 years, the number of private farms in the Biešankovičy District did not exceed a dozen or so.

In the early 2000s, seeking to reduce the number of loss-making enterprises in agriculture, the Belarusian authorities decided to merge smaller and less efficient *kolkhozes* into larger ones. Some, in a peculiarly interpreted form of “corporate social responsibility,” were transferred to state banks, manufacturing plants, and large private companies. After this consolidation campaign, the number of state agricultural enterprises in the Biešankovičy District fell from 19 to 8, two of which came under the control of state-owned companies in the agricultural processing sector.

In 2015, district authorities reported that the agricultural sector consisted of 8 state enterprises and 12 private farms specialising in meat, milk, and grain production (Biešankovičy District Executive Committee 2015). The following year, for the first time, one of the former *kolkhozes* was sold to a private investor. The expansion of the private sector gained momentum over the next four years. In May 2020, the district's official website listed 24 private farms, but the following year, another state enterprise was liquidated. In 2022, the number of private farms rose to 26 (Biešankovičy District Executive Committee 2022). In 2025, the authorities reported only four functioning state enterprises, one of which was managed by a director responsible for liquidation. Meanwhile, the number of private entities in agriculture increased to 30: 24 registered as small private farms, two as limited liability companies, and four as large private agricultural holdings (Biešankovičy District Executive Committee 2025).

The land of bankrupt *kolkhozes* was taken over by small farmers as well as highly specialised private companies engaged in grain production, poultry farming, and cattle breeding. Even state media admitted that private companies were more efficient: the grain yields of the most productive farmers were twice as high as those of state enterprises (Voroshko 2024). The number of people employed in agriculture also changed dramatically—in the Biešankovičy District, it more than halved over the past decade. In 2016, agriculture employed 1,406 people; by 2020, that number had dropped to 975, and by 2025, to only 628.

After the *kolkhozes* went bankrupt, a significant number of workers found employment in large private agricultural enterprises. To reach their new workplaces, they have to travel 20 to 50 kilometres daily (most often transported by their employers). Official statistics claim that work in private enterprises did not lead to a significant increase in wages. However, workers themselves note that motivation and work discipline have improved. Theft and alcohol abuse are not tolerated in private companies.

Private Farmer Steps Onto the Stage

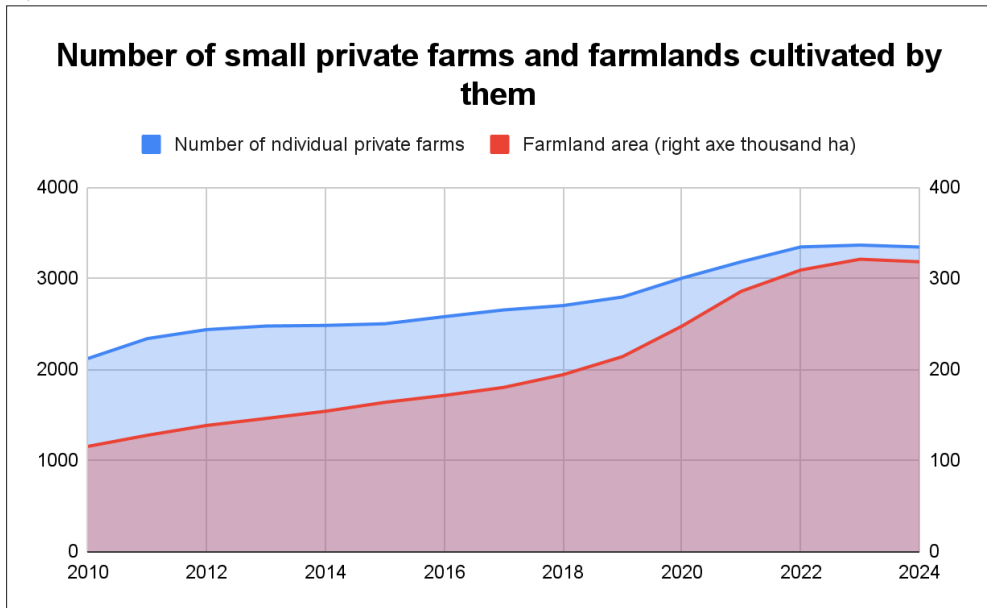
The transformation of property ownership in the agricultural sector, which has taken place in one of the poorest regions of Belarus, is most likely a harbinger of a process occurring in rural areas across the entire country. Figures show that since the end of 2010, indebted state-owned farms have increasingly been liquidated. This is the result of a long-term, drastic depopulation of villages, caused by the fact that collective farms were unable to provide residents with economic prospects. The stereotypical Belarusian village, where the state is the only employer and producer, is beginning—though very slowly—to become a thing of the past. For the first time in 80 years, private enterprises are starting to play a noticeable role in the economy and social life of the Belarusian countryside.

The only indicator of changes in property ownership structure that can be found in official Belarusian statistics is the number of individual farms. Between 2014 and 2024, the number of small small private farms increased by 74% — from 2475 (Belstat 2021: 17) to 3343 (Belstat 2025: 4). The area of land cultivated by them tripled — from 99.8 thousand hectares in 2014 (Belstat 2018: 35) to 317.2 thousand in 2024 (Belstat 2025: 7). Spectacularly rapid growth has been observed since 2019. It is most visible in the eastern, poorer regions of Belarus — Viciebsk and Mahiloŭ.

In the Viciebsk region, the area of land cultivated by small private farms increased by 145% between 2016 and 2024 (Main Statistical Office of the Viciebsk Region

2024: 187). In the Mahiloŭ region, it expanded by 144% (Main Statistical Office of the Mahiloŭ Region 2024: 185). In the remaining regions, the increase in cultivated land by private farms during the same period ranged from 44% in the Brest region (Main Statistical Office of the Brest Region 2024: 185) to 99% in the Hrodna region (Main Statistical Office of the Hrodna Region 2024: 186)

Figure 1.



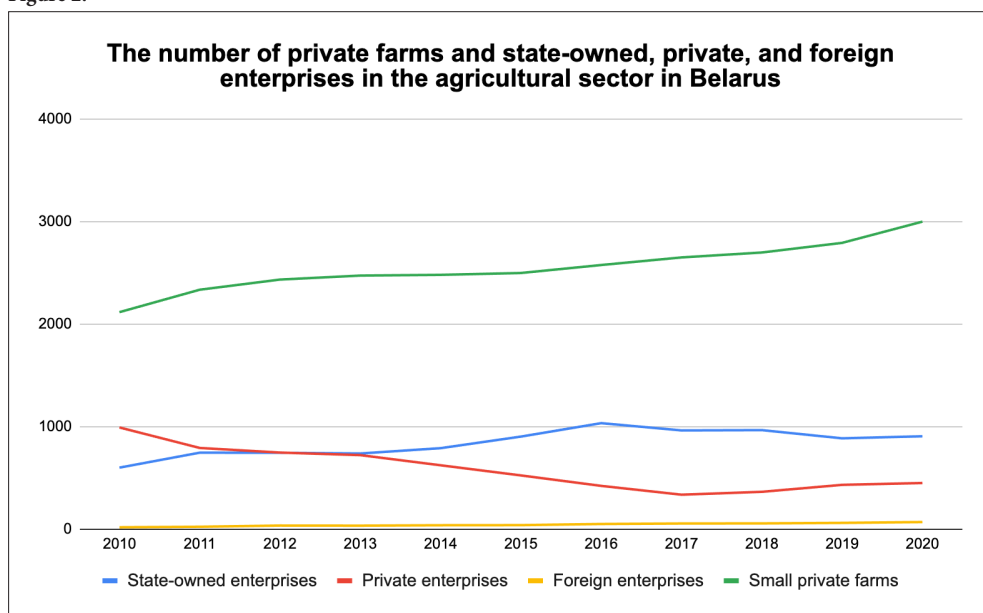
Source: Belstat

It should be noted, however, that in 2024 the areas cultivated by small private farmers still accounted for only 4% of the country's total agricultural land (Belstat 2025: 18). Individual farms employed 11,966 people (Belstat 2025a: 5), 19 times fewer than medium and large agricultural enterprises (Belstat 2025: 8). The average individual farm employed fewer than 4 people.

It is also worth noting that individual farms are not the only form of private agricultural enterprise recognised under Belarusian law. However, changes that are undoubtedly taking place in the medium and large enterprise sectors are much more difficult to assess. Since 2021, the Belarusian Statistical Office (Belstat) has not published data on the ownership structure of larger agricultural organisations. Available statistics, however, indicate that between 2010 and 2016, the number of state-owned enterprises in the agricultural sector not only failed to decline but increased (Belstat

2021: 18). Private companies were leaving the market or registering as individual farmers. It was only in 2019 that this trend reversed, and the number of state-owned enterprises began to fall.

Figure 2.



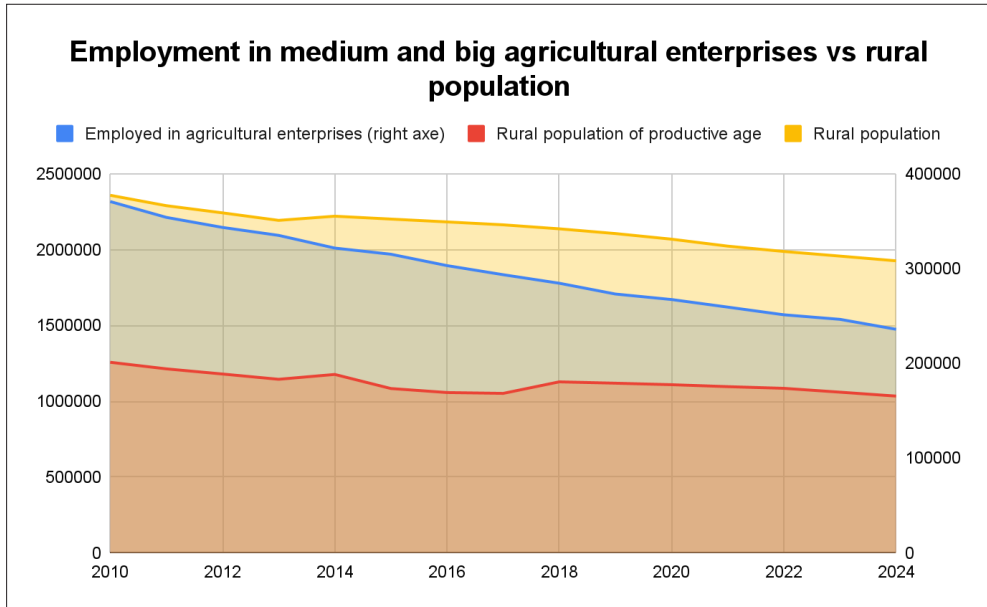
Source: Author's calculations based on Belstat data

Trends of the Last Decade: Mass Desertion of Collective Farmers and Dramatic Depopulation of Villages

Another indicator of the decline of state-owned agricultural enterprises may be the drop in employment in large and medium-sized farms. It is worth noting that even in 2025, Belarusian statistics did not give due attention to small farmers. Methodology applied by the National Statistical Office in the last decade suggests that only those working in organisations are considered employed in the agricultural sector (Belstat 2021). Private farms are not classified as organisations, and therefore, the people they employ are not counted as working in the agricultural sector.

From Figure no. 3 below, it follows that between 2010 and 2024, the number of employees in medium and large agricultural organisations fell by almost 135,000, or 37%. What is particularly interesting is that employment in these organisations is declining faster than both the rural population as a whole and the number of working-age rural residents. This trend has been especially visible since 2014. Even raising the retirement age in 2017 did not help stop the decline in the number of employees in agricultural organisations. The outflow from *kolkhozes* may be even faster than the overall reduction in employment in agricultural organisations. As one could see from the case study at the beginning of this article, private agricultural firms absorb the labour force released from failing state-owned farms.

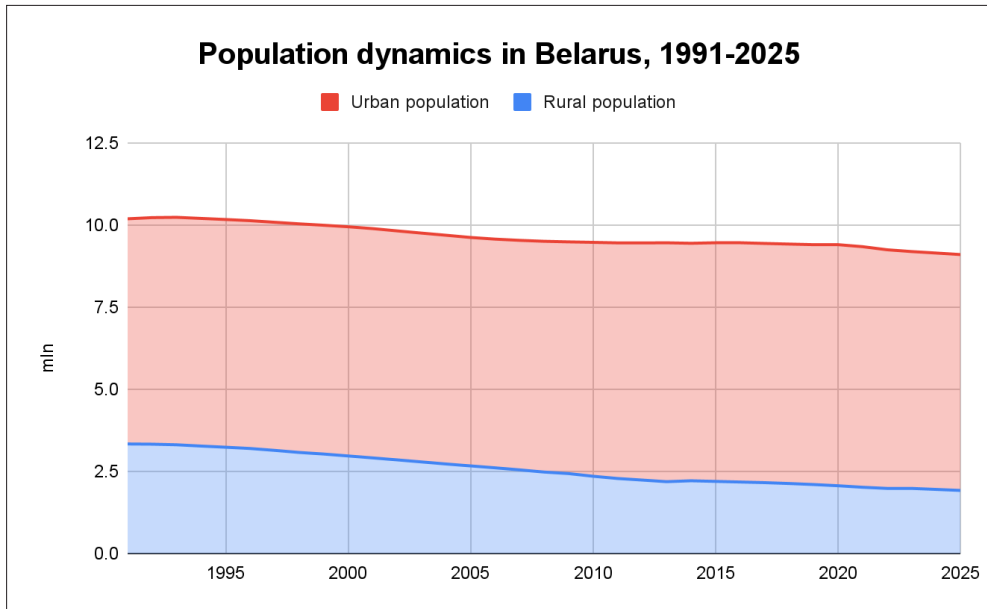
Figure 3.



Source: Belstat

The proportion of the rural population in Belarus declined rapidly throughout Lukashenka's entire period in power. This happened even though the dictator, who in the late 1980s was the director of a state farm, often addressed agricultural topics in his speeches. The "village revival" program implemented in 2005 – 2010, which involved investments in housing and road construction, also failed to stop the rural exodus. By the early 2010s, Belarus was already the leader among the former USSR countries in terms of both the pace and extent of urbanisation (Shcherbakova 2013).

Figure 4.



Source: Belstat

If in 1991, 33% of Belarusians lived in rural areas, then by 2010 the share of the rural population had fallen to 25%, and by 2025 it had dropped further to 21%. Meanwhile, the level of urbanisation in Belarus (79%) is higher than not only in Russia (75%), Ukraine (70%), Lithuania (69%), or Poland (60%) — it even surpasses Germany's rate (78%). Belstat data show that after a temporary slowdown in the middle of the last decade, the depopulation process began to accelerate again in 2019 (Belstat 2025b).

Rural depopulation not only reduces the cost-effectiveness of maintaining infrastructure and creates a shortage of labour, but it also directly translates into a reduction in food production in Belarus. For example, in 2010, citizens (most often rural residents) produced 6.8 million tons of potatoes on their own plots, accounting for 87% of the national harvest; they also produced 1.1 billion eggs (32% of national production) and 99,000 tons of pork (25% of national production) (Belstat 2018: 36). Over the next 14 years, however, these numbers dropped severalfold. In 2024, households produced 2.4 million tons of potatoes (75% of national production) and 490 million eggs (13% of national production) (Belstat 2025: 26). Pork production had already fallen nearly threefold by 2020, both in relative and absolute terms (Belstat 2021: 33). Notably, the decline in household production in most cases was not compensated for by large and medium-sized enterprises or individual farms. The

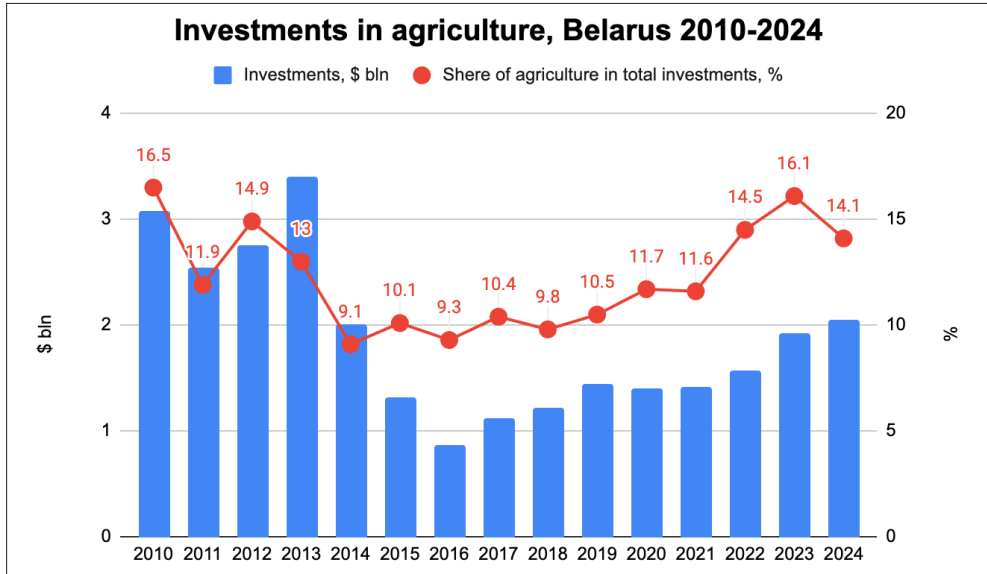
resulting deficit was most likely covered by imports, or reduced the export potential of Belarusian agriculture.

The Main Reason for the Decline of Collective Farms: Decreasing State Subsidies

The growing problems of state-owned agricultural enterprises can be explained by the drastic drop in subsidies that occurred after 2014. According to the IPM Research Centre, direct government support for agriculture in 2004–2011 amounted to 3–4% of GDP, or more than USD 2 billion annually. According to experts, in 2012, budget transfers, energy discounts, credit and tax breaks, etc., were equivalent to USD 5 billion (Akhramovich et al., 2015: 71). In the same year, the gross value added of Belarusian agriculture — that is, the value of all its products — amounted to USD 5.3 billion (Beltsat 2018: 14).

In the first decade of this century, agriculture in Belarus accounted for around 15% of all investment in fixed assets. (Akhramovich et al. 2015: 14). This money was spent on purchasing machinery, transportation equipment, the construction of new buildings, etc. In the first half of the 2010s, state-owned agricultural enterprises carried out over 50% of their investments not from their own funds, but from resources provided by the state as part of support programs (Shpak et al. 2018: 288). State banks issued more than 20% of all loans granted to Belarusian companies to agricultural enterprises (Kruk & Haiduk 2013: 20). It is worth noting that a large share of these loans were disguised subsidies that did not need to be repaid.

Figure 5.



Source: Belstat

After the 2011 Belarusian financial crisis, the authorities began limiting both the amount of subsidies for the state sector and the share of agricultural enterprises in them (Smits & Cojocarú 2018: 23). This process accelerated after another crisis in 2014 (Chabatul' et al., 2022: 590), this time triggered by Russia, which annexed Crimea and brought international sanctions upon itself. The change in the Belarusian authorities' priorities can be traced using Figure 5, which shows the level of investment in fixed assets in the agricultural sector.

Between 2013 and 2016, the amount of funds allocated to agricultural enterprises fell fourfold, from USD 3.4 billion to USD 870 million. The share of agriculture in the drastically reduced investments dropped to 9%. The indebted and least efficient collective farms of the Viciebsk and Mahiloŭ regions did not survive three years of such austerity policies and began to collapse. In 2022, most likely, seeing the rapid degradation of state agriculture, the Belarusian authorities decided to increase government support. This decision was made despite scarce budgetary resources, the ongoing war waged by Russia against Ukraine next door, and international sanctions imposed on Minsk for assisting Russian aggression. In 2022–2024, investments in agriculture increased to USD 2 billion, although this still amounted to less support than at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century (Belstat 2025c).

To increase the effectiveness of the cash injection, the Lukashenka regime most likely decided to carry out stricter oversight over the distribution of funds. Media reports began to emerge about dozens of criminal cases launched against the management of state agricultural enterprises—for improper performance of official duties, theft, bribery, or falsifying statistics (Belsat TV 2023). In December 2023, Belarus's Minister of Internal Affairs announced that over one thousand economic crimes had been detected in agriculture that year, accounting for one-third of all recorded crimes in that category (Zerkalo 2023).

Conclusions

The drastic drop in subsidies that followed the 2014 crisis shook the position of state-owned enterprises, which had dominated Belarusian agriculture unchallenged since Stalin's time. Since 2014, they have lost one in every three employees, and many have gone bankrupt. The disappearance of collective farms dependent on state funding in the poorest eastern regions of Belarus led to a threefold increase in the number of private farmers. Across the country, the number of small farms and the area of land they cultivate nearly doubled over the past decade. This growth was particularly visible after 2019. Former collective farm lands were also taken over by larger, mostly private enterprises, but it is difficult to assess their share in Belarusian agriculture, since in 2021 the Belarusian Statistical Office stopped publishing data on this subject.

The newly established private enterprises do not yet play a decisive role in Belarusian agriculture. Small farms have an average of four employees and are more of a means of self-employment for people who do not want to move to the cities. While the return of private farmers has not yet led to radical economic changes, it is important from a social perspective. For the first time in 90 years, a significant portion of land in Belarus is being cultivated by private owners. Private companies and individual farmers have the potential to promote values of individualism, responsible work, and entrepreneurship: They are slowly undermining the paternalism and passivity that, for decades, were the foundation of upbringing in Soviet collective farms.

The effects of Lukashenka's thirty years long experiment of preserving state ownership in agriculture are dramatic. Under the rule of the former state farm director, the Belarusian countryside has lost 40% of its population. The collective farm village, whose mentality Lukashenka still appeals to in his speeches, is no longer something close, familiar, or important to the highly urbanised Belarusian society. Depopulation, as already noted, is not the only socio-economic process taking place

in the Belarusian countryside. In agriculture, one can observe the same process of de-stationization that is advancing in the rest of the Belarusian economy.

Reducing citizens' dependence on the state was one of the reasons behind the change in political behaviour and the outbreak of mass protests in 2020. An increase in the number of private agricultural enterprises may also have political consequences. Numerous, dispersed private farmers are somewhat harder to force into participating in election fraud (though not entirely impossible), harder to control in terms of political views, and harder to compel into "donating" their resources for government-designated purposes.

Most likely, these changes—unfavourable for the Lukashenka regime—have been noticed by the authorities. In recent years, attempts have been made to increase subsidies to maintain control over the economy and rural population. In addition, steps are being taken to ensure "economic security," so as to reduce dependence on imports in the context of sanctions and the ongoing war next door (Lepel'skikraj 2024). For the past 10 years, the level of agricultural production in Belarus has been slowly declining, and in order to maintain it, the government will have to keep subsidies at no less than USD 3 billion—about 4% of GD: This is a significant expense, especially under the unpredictable conditions of sanctions and war. It should also be noted that even a return of financial support to post-2010 levels does not guarantee restoring production to the levels of that period. Sanctions have lengthened supply chains and increased the cost of imported seeds, feed additives, medicines, and plant protection products, without which production cannot be sustained.

The increase in subsidies observed since 2022 will most likely slow down but will not halt the depopulation of the countryside. A re-nationalisation of agriculture in the Viciebsk and Mahiloŭ regions is unlikely, as is any intensive expansion of the areas cultivated by private companies in the coming years. The Lukashenka regime continues to carry out mass political repressions, maintains a hostile attitude toward business, and regularly raises taxes. The development of any private enterprise can attract the attention of local authorities and oversight bodies interested in seizing resources for the state.

However, the processes taking place in Belarus's poorest regions show how private agriculture can emerge from the bottom up, even under a statist authoritarian regime. Contrary to the claims of the Belarusian authorities, the disappearance of collective farms will not lead to the complete depopulation of villages or the abandonment of most farmland. In place of inefficient state enterprises, small or larger private farms quickly emerge.

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