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Obstacles for Agricultural Cooperatives in Russia: The Competencies of Experts

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ABSTRACT

The Russian government wants to stimulate the development of cooperatives among private farmers. This study evaluates the competencies of the experts who are to guide potential members. The research team conducted a survey among these experts, measuring three theoretically derived dimensions of competencies: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The results reveal that the experts' competencies were poor. The respondents overestimated their competencies. Other factors as well indicate that the prospects for agricultural cooperatives are poor in Russia. The large agribusiness firms have a strong market position and much political power. The legal framework for cooperatives is dysfunctional.

Keywords: Soviet Union; post-communist; trust; skills; attitude.

1 Introduction

This paper takes its point of departure in the governmental programs for supporting agricultural cooperatives in the Russian Federation (hereinafter Russia). The concept of agricultural cooperatives is used in the same meaning as in Western countries: “a user-owned and controlled business from which benefits are derived and distributed on the basis of use” (Dunn, 1988, p. 85). Such agricultural cooperatives may offer a variety of services to their members, such as marketing and processing of the members’ products and sales of farm inputs, but they may also provide credits, insurances, and other services. In Russian vocabulary, such cooperatives are called “agricultural consumer cooperatives” (Golovina and Nilsson, 2009b). Some researchers use the concept “service cooperatives” to denote cooperatives with such a variety of operations (Yanbykh et al., 2019; Wolz et al., 2019). In the present study, the concept of “agricultural cooperatives” is used. Another type of cooperatives in Russia are “agricultural production cooperatives,” but as these are a type of labor cooperatives with roots in the Soviet collective farms, they are not included in this study.

After the formation of Russia in 1991 and the introduction of private property rights and market economic principles, the country’s agricultural production fell drastically (Golovina and Nilsson, 2009b; Wegren et al., 2019). During the 1990s, the Russian government tried to raise the country’s food production by giving support to private family farms, but this policy turned out to be less efficient. Together with other factors such as poor social safety nets, poor rural infrastructure and poor knowledge about how a market economy functions, the result was a declining rural population (Shagaida and Uzun, 2019). Many of the large production units with a background in the Soviet collective agriculture (sovkhozy and kolkhozy) survived, though transformed into commercial companies, agricultural holdings and production cooperatives. From the 2000s and onwards, the large-scale agribusiness enterprises have the ear of the government.

In spite of the dominance of the large-scale firms, the governance has set up programs for the development of private farming as well as agricultural cooperatives. Theoretical arguments as well as historical and international experiences indicate that agricultural cooperatives increase the volume of production at low cost. Private farming can be expected to be a more proficient organizational type because private property rights provide incentives to efficient operations, and because private farmers have low surveillance costs when there are no or few employed laborers (Binswanger et al., 1995; Eastwood et al., 2010; Wolz et al., 2016). Except for moderate agency problems, cooperatives have the strength of reducing the transaction costs of the agricultural producers (Staatz, 1984; Bonus, 1986; Nilsson, 1996; Williamson, 1998). When small agricultural producers are involved in cooperatives, there is less risk that they will be deceived by powerful independent businesses. Less risk implies that small producers will produce a large volume of agricultural products at a lower cost to the benefit of society at large and rural development in particular. Against this background, it is understandable that the Russian government has support programs with the intention of stimulating the development of private farming and cooperatives.

After many years of political stimulation, there are signs indicating that the private farming sector is about to become a force to be counted on (Golovina et al., 2019). Russian private farmers’ production volumes are rising as the farmers, to an increasing degree, succeed in attaining profitable operations. The number of private farmers was 261,400 in 2016 as compared to 174,800 in 2004, while their share of the country’s gross agricultural output was 12.5% in 2016 but only 6.3% in 2004. Successful private farmers are, however, reluctant to join cooperative societies. They would rather involve themselves in informal collaborative arrangements (Golovina et al., 2019). The fact that such informal networks help many farmers’ economy, however, does not contradict the government’s ambition for the growth of formal cooperatives.

The government has a variety of measures to stimulate the establishment and operations of agricultural cooperatives. In addition to financial help, the programs include the provision of advice to prospective cooperative members and to newly established cooperatives. The effects of all the measures, however, depend on the official decision-makers’ competencies concerning the conditions for cooperative business. This applies to all officials in the entire hierarchy – lawmakers, legal advisors, administrative staff, advisory people, agronomists, business experts, and not the least, the agricultural producers who are or will be cooperative members.

The aim of the present study is to explore the competencies of the officials who are employed by the Russian government to promote the development of agricultural cooperatives. The study focuses on individuals, who are between the government and the agricultural producers. Because cooperatives did not exist in the country for most of the Soviet era, it can be assumed that the officials’ competencies in the field of cooperatives are inadequate.

There are many studies about the competencies of experts (Ploum et al., 2018; Llorent et al., 2020) and many studies about Russian agricultural cooperatives (Kurakin and Visser, 2017; Sobolev et al., 2018; Golovina et al., 2019). However, no previous study has investigated the qualifications of advisors to Russian cooperatives. It is, however, uncertain whether the findings of this study may provide inputs to decisions about how to promote cooperatives, because the

topic is politically sensitive. A theoretical contribution of the study is that it shows how the formation of agricultural cooperatives depends on the institutional setting, in which the cooperatives are operating.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 contains an overview of how and why governments in different countries give various types of support to agricultural cooperatives. Section 3 presents an account of the support programs of the Russian government. Section 4 provides a presentation of the concept of competencies, including different components of this concept. In section 5, these concepts are operationalized, and the design of the empirical study is presented. Section 6 presents the results of the empirical study. Section 7 contains a discussion as well as conclusions.

2 Support to cooperatives

Several studies indicate that there are difficulties in establishing and running agricultural cooperatives in Russia (Golovina, 2012; Wolz et al., 2019). When summarizing a large pan-European research program about support to agricultural cooperatives, Hagedorn (2014) identified similar difficulties in other post-communist countries:

The results reveal important requirements for cooperatives to be sustainable: overcoming the communist legacy of mistrust against cooperative organizations, convincing members by building trust, coping with fundamental collective action problems, constructive communication that takes the problems and ideas of members seriously, finding cooperative leaders able to cope with members' opportunism and a facilitating state encouraging the development of cooperatives (Hagedorn, 2014, p. 555).

The Russian government's programs for stimulating agricultural cooperatives has been so extensive that the concept of "top-down organized cooperatives" has been coined (Golovina and Nilsson, 2009a, 2011; Kurakin and Visser, 2017; Maksimov, 2018). The government may even establish cooperatives, and agricultural producers are free to join them with little or no financial investment requirements and without much management responsibility. Such governmental involvement is negative for member involvement (Golovina and Nilsson, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Kurakin and Visser, 2017). In her analysis of the top-down cooperatives' difficulties in Russia, Golovina (2012) arrives at the same conclusions as Hagedorn's (2014):

The implementation of projects resembles the former administrative procedures (with plans and reports), and it has not yet been realized that cooperative societies created in this way are doomed to a short life. The top-down procedure for establishing cooperatives leads to low involvement from the side of the farmers, but on the other hand, this procedure helps to accelerate the process of cooperative establishments (Golovina, 2012, p. 443).

The concept of "top-down cooperatives" is mentioned in contrast to "bottom-up organized cooperatives," which are conceived as grassroots organizations established on the producers' own initiative. The literature on cooperatives gives the impression that cooperatives are created by individuals who voluntarily join, invest, and participate. However, the concepts of "top-down" and "bottom-up" do not represent any dichotomy but rather end-points of a continuum. Thus, governmental support to cooperatives may occur in many countries, although to a varying extent and in varying ways.

When cooperatives have been established in Western economies, the initiative has often been taken by a small group of large and entrepreneurial farmers with major resources. They have had the most to gain from a cooperative. Many cooperatives may have enjoyed support already in their foundational stage, and they often continuously receive a variety of advantages from governments. The support may be of different kinds, depending on the cultures and traditions in different countries.

Legislation. With few exceptions, all countries have specific legislation on cooperatives. Such legislation is important, because without it, cooperatives would be regarded as cartels and would, thus, harm the economy (Baarda, 1989). There are considerable differences between the legal frameworks in different countries. There are even different rules for cooperatives in the different states of the U.S.A. Amendments to the law are not unusual, and these most often imply more permissive regulations (Nilsson, 1998). For example, today's Finnish legal framework for cooperatives resembles that of limited liability companies. The Russian legislation for cooperatives is, in contrast, split up into several laws, which are not aligned on some issues. For example, the law "About agricultural cooperatives" defines cooperatives as non-commercial organizations, but it includes an article about the distribution of profits. The Russian legislation reflects only one type of cooperative organizational model, namely the so-called traditional model. This corresponds to the International Cooperative Alliance's (ICA) set of cooperative principles, which have their origin in the industrial revolution of the 19th century. The ICA principles are not adapted to cooperatives operating in competitive circumstances (Yu and Nilsson, 2019). For example, they stipulate collective capital formation, whereby members have weak incentives to invest. A clause about members' full legal liability, i.e. their responsibility for the cooperative's debts, inhibits farmers' willingness to participate and thereby reduces the cooperatives' potential to reap economies of scale.

Taxation. In most countries, cooperatives enjoy single taxation, which means that the patronage refunds and the dividends that the cooperatives pay to members are deductibles on the cooperatives' taxation statement. The rationale for this policy is that a cooperative is not an independent legal person but an extension of members' businesses. Investor-owned firms are taxed for profits, and stock owners are taxed for dividends. In Mediterranean countries, cooperatives may enjoy lower taxation than investor-owned firms. They may also enjoy subsidized interest rates on borrowed capital, the argument being that cooperatives contribute to lower unemployment and to regional development. Russia has a double taxation rule. Cooperatives are obliged to pay taxes in line with investor-owned firms, and members are taxed for the profits they receive from their cooperatives.

Market conditions. Governments generally have a positive view of cooperatives because cooperatives serve the interests of society by stimulating the production of large volumes of products at a low cost. Cooperatives balance up the skewed power balance between farmers and investor-owned partnering firms. Thus, cooperatives have historically often enjoyed some market protection, and governments may even involve cooperatives in the execution of agricultural policies (Cobia, 1989). In Russia, however, similar market protection for cooperatives is unknown. The value chains for food are controlled by large agroholdings with government contacts (Shagaida and Uzun, 2019).

Financial support. In the western economies, governments seldom provide financial support to cooperatives and their members. Russia may provide financial support for cooperatives' material and technical bases, but not all cooperatives can receive financial support as this is a matter of competition.

Advisory services. If new agricultural cooperatives are to be established and developed, the producers must have certain knowledge about legal, administrative, financial, economic, and social matters. In several Western countries, federations of cooperatives provide such educational programs. A unit of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has the task of disseminating information and advising cooperatives as have many of the U.S. agricultural universities (Cropp, 1989; Henehan et al., 2011).

The conclusion is that different types of governmental support to cooperatives is found in many Western countries. The Russian government's support program is, however, so comprehensive that it may be justified to refer to it as resulting in top-down cooperatives. There are few international parallels to the Russian government's financial support to cooperatives. Another observation is that in most countries, legislation on cooperatives is successively being liberalized while that is not so in Russia. Governmental advisory services to cooperatives are not unique, but whether or not Russian advisors are sufficiently competent is an unresolved issue.

3 The Russian government's promotion of cooperatives

3.1 Support program to agricultural cooperatives

The present-day difficulties for agricultural cooperatives in Russia are in contrast to historical records. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Russia was one of the world's leading countries as concerns cooperatives (Chayanov, 1991[1919]; Yanbykh et al., 2019). However, the cooperative operations ceased when the country's agricultural sector was collectivized in the early 1930s.

In order to restore private farming, the Russian Government in 2006 started the National Project "Development of the Agricultural Sector" aimed to stimulate the development of small-scale agricultural producers. The project initially ran for two years, but it continued until 2012 in a slightly revised form. It was intended to reconsider and improve the legal base of private farmers, their land ownership, their access to financial and credit resources, their sales opportunities, and their access to information through communication with local authorities (COAC, 2006).

One part of this project was the promotion of agricultural cooperatives. Factors that hindered the development of cooperation, however, were not sufficiently investigated and addressed. The government's positive view of agricultural stock companies in the 1990s continued. This preference manifested itself in legislation and policies that benefitted large-scale agricultural firms; trade liberalization and foreign investments in companies that worked with logistics, processing, and the sales of imported products. The result was a heterogeneous body of small and mid-sized agricultural producers in remote locations and with poor education and without any interest in cooperative business (Deshkovkaya, 2006). These matters were addressed in a policy measure on the financial support of borrowed capital. Within the project, the Russian government subsidized the interest rate on credits distributed through agricultural credit cooperatives. The subsidy was in the range of 95% of the interest rate. As a result, the number of cooperatives increased fivefold from 2006 to 2013 (SSGRT, 2015).

With its support during 2006-2012, the Ministry of Agriculture aimed to achieve 1,500 new cooperatives across all regions of the country within the period 2016-2017.ⁱ By September 2017, this plan had been only 50% fulfilled. Despite the campaign, the number of cooperatives in 2018 was 12.8% lower than in 2015 (Ministry of Agriculture, 2017). In 2018, only 61% of the cooperatives had operations, 34% existed only on paper, and about 6% were in the process of

liquidation (SPARK, 2018). According to Maksimov (2018), the average lifecycle of an agricultural cooperative in Russia is 7.2 years. The subsidy-reporting period for cooperatives is seven years. About half (54.6%) of the cooperatives that were established due to governmental subsidies closed within five to ten years from their start. The cooperative development was not impressive in spite of the government's promotional campaigns.

The Russian Government has continued to promote the establishment of agricultural cooperatives. According to a Presidential Decreeⁱⁱ and a Federal Projectⁱⁱⁱ announced in 2018, the Russian government plans to increase the number of members of agricultural cooperatives in the country from 137,700 to 230,000 by the end of 2024.

A governmental program allows financial support to cooperatives^{iv}. The money is meant to strengthen the cooperatives' material and technical bases, which are specified as (1) building, reconstruction and modernization of production facilities, (2) purchasing and installation of new equipment or producing facilities, (3) purchasing of specialized transportation equipment, and (4) compensating the interest rate when equipment is leased.

The financial support is granted in the form of a competition, i.e. the cooperatives must submit applications, some of which are approved by the government. A subsidy is granted under certain conditions with 60% governmental money and 40% member contributions. In 2017, however, the member contributions were allowed to be only 20%, while the other 20% was paid by the regional governments' budget. Consequently, the total governmental support was 80%.

A number of criteria must be fulfilled if a cooperative is to have a chance at receiving subsidies, but only a few applications are accepted. On average, three cooperatives per region received governmental subsidies in 2017. The requirements for financial grants state:

- The cooperatives must have functioned for more than twelve months since the day they were formed,
- They are harvesting, storing, processing, sorting, slaughtering, cooling, making preparation for the retailing of agricultural products as well as wild berries and mushrooms.
- They have no less than ten members.
- They have revenues of at least 70% of the processing and sales activities.

The amount of subsidies for strengthening the technical and material bases of agricultural cooperatives has risen significantly over the years: 0.579 billion rubles in 2015, 1.232 billion in 2016, 1.701 billion in 2017, and 3.309 billion in 2018 (Ministry of Agriculture, 2019) (In 2018, one million rubles corresponded to about 11,000 euros or 13,200 US dollars.)

3.2 Centers of Competence

If cooperatives are to be formed, information is required that can bridge gaps in trust and explain the conditions for cooperative business. The farmers must rely on advice and help from insightful people whose task is to execute the directives in the governmental plans. Thus, one element in the Russian government's cooperative support program is the establishment of Centers of Competence (Competence Centers) for agricultural cooperation in all regions of the Russian Federation.^v These centers are meant to stimulate cooperative development through the dissemination of information, support, and consulting. The Centers of Competence are to convey knowledge about the conditions for cooperation, educate producers in terms of cooperative legislation, and forward information about agricultural cooperation from governmental decision-makers. The staff at the Centers of Competence are likely to have an academic degree in economics or law, though not necessarily in cooperative business.

The Centers of Competence are often set up in regional centers, which are often located far away from active agricultural zones where there is a potential of cooperation. Consequently, farmers have difficulties reaching the centers. For example, in the Rostov Region, there are 160 kilometers between the location of the Center of Competence and the area with the most dairy producers.

3.3 Assessments of the promotional campaigns

According to previous studies, Russian farmers are not particularly receptive to information about agricultural cooperatives (Golovina, 2012; Hagedorn, 2014). They have little experience of collaborating with other farmers, and there is widespread lack of trust. Most of the farmers do not believe that cooperation will help them to make their businesses more proficient. Farmers do not care much about their local communities. They are often poorly educated, and cooperative matters are difficult to understand.

Several researchers indicate that the Russian government's programs for stimulating the establishment of cooperatives have not been successful.

In recent decades, the number of cooperatives has grown significantly under the state programs starting with the national project 'the Development of the AIC [agro-industrial complex]'. In 2006-2013, their number grew fivefold, and the growth continued after the project finished. However, agricultural consumer cooperatives still satisfy less than 1% of their members' needs (Sobolev, Kurakin, Pakhomov, and Trotsuk, 2018, p. 76).

Golovina and Nilsson conducted surveys among cooperatives that were established through governmental campaigns in the Kurgan region. First, Golovina and Nilsson (2009a) compared the views of the members of newly established cooperatives with those of agricultural producers who were not members. Then, the authors compared the responses to the surveys just after the producers had joined the cooperatives with the responses a few months later when the cooperatives were about to be dissolved (Golovina and Nilsson, 2009b). Finally, the authors investigated whether the regional government's decision-makers were aware of the views of the agricultural producers (Golovina and Nilsson, 2011).

The studies indicate that the investigated 21 cooperatives that resulted from the governmental campaigns became weak. Member involvement was minimal as the cooperatives were typically established by, financed by, and governed by district or local authorities with poor knowledge of cooperatives. The heterogeneity of the membership led to low trust among members, and the producers had poor knowledge of cooperative business. Members were neither willing to invest in the cooperatives nor able to govern them. Membership had been motivated by the governmental subsidies. However, with small numbers of members and low volumes of products, the cooperatives could not reap any economies of scale, whereby the producers-members became disappointed.

Golovina and Nilsson (2011) report that less than one year after the producers had become members, they were less willing to invest in and manage the cooperatives. They had even less trust in each other and in the cooperative. They had gained some knowledge about cooperative business, but seemingly, this experience was not positive. In sum, the top-down organized cooperatives in the Kurgan region were not successful.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from a study by Kurakin and Visser (2017). These authors conducted case studies of some newly established cooperatives in the Belgorod Region where the regional government provided massive support to new cooperatives. The cooperatives were granted guaranteed sales and were shielded from competition. Kurakin and Visser (2017) found that the members exhibited opportunistic behavior. There were no plans to advance the involvement of members. The members did not control management of the cooperatives and were quite ignorant. The managers made all the crucial decisions while pursuing their own interests (Sobolev et al., 2018). More than 85% of the cooperatives established in Belgorod had failed by the end of the support program.

A conclusion from the above-mentioned studies is that knowledge about cooperatives within the Russian agricultural sector is poor. It is understandable that farmers are not familiar with this organizational form, but more remarkable is the deficient competencies among governmental decision-makers and the officials who are to execute the policies.

4 Conceptual framework

4.1 The concept of competence

For cooperatives to be established and persist there must be a variety of qualifications among members and potential members as well as social relations within the group (Thompson and Valentinov, 2017). For such conditions to exist, there may be a need for assistance from people with specific competencies in cooperative businesses. This study concerns the competencies of the staff of the Centers of Competence and other governmental employees who are involved in the development of agricultural cooperatives in Russia. The core concept was "competence," which is explained by Ploum et al. (2018, p. 114) as: "competencies are described as enabling successful task performance and problem solving with respect to real-world problems, challenges, and/or opportunities." Thus, the types, the amounts, and the composition of competencies that a person has must be related to the tasks that this person is to perform. A person is able to perform well with a balanced composition of strong competencies of the most appropriate types.

Because the concept of competence is multifaceted and contingent upon prevailing conditions, the concept is used in several scientific disciplines, most often in pedagogical and human resource management literature (Boyatzis, 2006). Consequently, there is no specific theory about competence but there are many unrelated conceptualizations, such as relational competencies (Wieland and Wallenburg, 2013), structural competencies (Metzl and Hansen, 2014), and socio-emotional and socio-affective competencies (Llorent et al., 2020).

Even within the realm of management studies, where the present study belongs, researchers have proposed different ways of conceptualizing competence (Boyatzis, 2006; Russo, 2016; Vazirani, 2010; Suhariom et al., 2014; Ploum et al., 2018). Researchers have suggested different ways of classifying the components of competencies (Boyatzis, 2006). In line with Ploum et al. (2018, p. 115), three dimensions of competencies are used in this study, namely knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

- *Knowledge* consists of an unlimited stock of cognitions that people acquire through their upbringing, education, training, verbal communication, media, etc. Learning presupposes complex cognitive processes. Knowledge can be estimated through tests and through assessments made by the focal person or by others.

- *Skills* are the result of practicing and obtaining know-how. Skills are practical knowledge of how to get something done. People “learn from peers, learn by doing, learn from feedback, learn by copying, learn by experiment, learn by problem solving, and learn from mistakes” (Ploum et al., 2018, p. 121).
- *Attitudes* are the mental capacity for involvement, motivation, curiosity, and willingness to learn (Boyatzis, 2006). These factors may to some extent be inborn, but it is also possible for individuals to deliberately develop their personality traits. Attitudes are related to individual characteristics, talents, human traits, or qualities that drive a person to act or react in a certain way under certain circumstances. To perform well, a person must have “a value system to support their actions (i.e., attitude element of competence)” (Ploum et al., 2018, p. 116).

4.2 Propositions

An empirical investigation was conducted to explore the extent to which the cooperative experts have good or limited competencies. The investigation focused on three propositions, which are derived from the above discussion about knowledge, skills, and attitudes of cooperative experts, combined with the account of Russian agricultural cooperatives in Section 3.

Level of competencies. The cooperative experts had an employment contract with a governmental office. Employment contracts state what employees are to do or what they are to accomplish. However, like other contracts, employment contracts are incomplete (Grossman and Hart, 1986; Hart and Moore, 1990; Hart, 1995). Only in some cases can the employee’s tasks be programmed, monitored, and measured, and thus, the employee has limited potential to cheat the employer (Eisenhardt, 1989). In other cases, employment contracts are more incomplete. The tasks to be performed are so complicated that the employer cannot state what the employee is to do but only what the employee is to accomplish. The employer has difficulties to assess the work of the employee. In such a case, information asymmetry occurs (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). The employer and the employee have different knowledge of the working conditions, different assessments of outcomes, different views on objectives, etc.

The relation between cooperative experts and governmental offices are likely characterized by information asymmetry. The governmental offices in Russia have limited knowledge about the conditions under which the cooperatives are to operate, especially because there is no tradition of cooperatives and no educational programs for cooperative business. The employees are in a position to exploit this weakness. The persons who apply for the job as experts can obtain major advantages. Large geographical and organizational distances between the employer and the employee imply that the employee will be less strictly controlled.

The governmental offices have limited knowledge about how the cooperative experts are to work, cannot measure their performance, and do not know how outside factors affect the performance of the experts. The goal of the Centers of Competence is vaguely stated, whereby neither the employer nor the experts know what is to be achieved. The performance of the experts depends on a range of external factors. The results of the experts’ activities can be seen only in a distant future. In newly established organizations such as the Centers of Competence, the informal roles of employees are unclear. It is also likely that the organization is bureaucratically structured, whereby formal positions are more important than competencies.

Based on this theoretical reasoning, there is a high probability that the employers of the cooperative experts have not recruited highly qualified employees.

Proposition 1. The level of competencies of the cooperative experts is limited.

Cooperative experts’ assessment of their competence. Considering the difficulties to assess individuals’ competencies, one may expect differences between the competencies that individuals consider themselves to have and the opinions that others have. The experts that are employed to support cooperative development are likely to have higher thoughts about their competencies compared to how their competencies would be if they were measured in other ways. Individuals tend to overestimate their competencies, which is related to their self-esteem (Ploum et al., 2018). On the other hand, people with poor competencies often realize this fact, especially when the level of competencies is very low.

Proposition 2: The cooperative experts have an unclear view of their competencies.

Dimensions of competencies. A person’s performance depends on this person’s competencies in the form of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in relation to the tasks that are to be performed. However, because this person’s performance is also influenced by various institutional and social factors (financial means, work team members, etc.), it is difficult to assess how the person’s competencies are related to the competencies (Suhariom et al., 2014). The assessment of a person’s competencies depends on who makes the assessment (Russo 2016). Considering that the performance of an individual encompasses competencies of different types, it is interesting to inquire into the various dimensions of competence of this individual (Wieland and Wallenburg, 2013). Perhaps an individual ranks high in knowledge but low in attitudes, and such an imbalanced composition of dimensions of competencies is likely to lead to

poorer performance. “Competencies identified in relation to a specific change agent’s context are usually combinations of the key competencies” (Ploum et al., 2018, p. 114).

Proposition 3: There are differences between how the different categories of cooperative experts score on the different dimensions of competencies.

5 Methodology

5.1 Survey

Data are needed about the competencies of the cooperative experts to test the three propositions. Measurements of a person’s competencies for performing a certain task can be conducted in different ways. Boyatzis (2006, p. 6) writes that people around the focal person often can inform about that person’s competence, adding “assessment center and simulations coded by reliable ‘experts’.” The competencies may be estimated by researchers, an employment agency, the person’s employer, or the person’s colleagues or subordinates. The other procedure is that the focal person assesses his or her own competence. Both procedures involve much subjectivity, but as in behavioral science in general, there is no possible way to obtain factual measurements of competencies. Both procedures have been used in previous research about people’s competencies (Vazirani, 2010; Suhariom et al., 2014; Ploum et al., 2018; Llorent et al., 2020).

In the present study, both approaches are used. The research team conducted a survey among a sample of the experts who worked with the promotion of agricultural cooperatives in Russia. The questionnaire that was presented to the respondents contained a number of questions about specific competencies, as classified in Subsection 4.1 and a question that asked the respondents to assess their own competence.

The research team had a unique opportunity to collect data from cooperative experts in connection with a seminar about establishing agricultural cooperatives. A large share of these experts in many regions of Russia participated in this seminar. It would be difficult to obtain data from such a large number of respondents and a high response frequency if the data was to be collected by mail, telephone or internet, and it would be difficult to reach these potential respondents, because there is no register of cooperative experts. The seminar was organized according to a request by the Russian Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with the Federal Corporation for the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises. It was the second of four annual seminars organized for the Centers of Competence. It was held in Moscow on the 25-26th of June, 2019.

The participants at the seminar were people who had responded affirmatively to an invitation to the seminar about agricultural cooperatives. The participants represented three organizational types. First, there were 54 persons who worked in the newly created *Centers of Competence* from 44 of the 85 regions of the Russian Federation. The regional Centers of Competence had an average of four employees. One or two representatives from each Center of Competence attended the seminar. Second, invitations were sent to all the *regional offices of the Ministry of Agriculture*. Representatives from twelve regions participated. Most regions that were represented had one participant, while in some cases, there were two. One regional office sent three advisors. There were 15 representatives from the regional offices of the Ministry of Agriculture. Third, there were eight representatives from *other public organizations* dealing with agricultural cooperation, such as cooperative audit unions. Thus, the total number of participants was 77.

During a 30 minute break between two sessions of the seminar, the research team handed out a questionnaire. The seminar participants were asked to respond to the questions and then hand over the filled-in questionnaire to the research team. All seminar participants filled in the questionnaires, which implies that there is no non-response bias. Because the data collection had to take place during rushed conditions, it was not possible to include any questions about the respondents’ education or other background data, nor did the procedure allow any follow-up questions.

Even though a significant share of Russia’s cooperative experts participated in the seminar, it is not possible to estimate the sample’s representativeness. There is no register of the population of cooperative experts, so it is not possible to select a random sample. There may be a self-selection bias, because the respondents participated voluntarily in the seminar.

5.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire concerning the respondents’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes contained a total of seven questions, covering each of the three components of competence. Because the data collection had to take place during a short break between two sessions, the questions had to be few, simple, and briefly stated. A large number of questions, and more complicated ones, might have meant fewer responses and partially completed questionnaires (Braun et al., 2012). All persons in the sample responded to all the questions in the questionnaire. The items in the questionnaire were as follows:

Knowledge

- *Legal liability of the cooperative members:* The respondents were presented with a question and asked to choose one of three response alternatives: "Which of the following three options are correct for the concept 'legal liability': (1) The responsibility of a member is constrained to the member's share capital. (2) Additional responsibility is stated in the charter of a cooperative. (3) The member's responsibility for the national subsidies." (Correct answer = 1; Incorrect answer = 0).
- *Minimum number of members according to Russian legislation.* The respondents were asked the following question: "How many members can be in a cooperative? (1) No less than five physical persons. (2) No less than ten, as stipulated in the subsidy requirements." (Correct answer = 1; Incorrect answer = 0).
- *Rules concerning internal governance:* The respondents were asked to choose one of the following statements: "The chairman and the managing director of the cooperative: (1) must be two different persons; (2) one person can be responsible for these two positions." (Correct answer = 1; Incorrect answer = 0).

Skills

Skills concerned whether a respondent had practical knowledge of cooperatives, either acquired before they started to work with agricultural cooperatives, or before the year when the Federal Project started. The respondents were presented with two questions.

- *Work in agricultural cooperatives:* The question was: "Have you worked in an agricultural cooperative?" (Yes = 1, No = 0).
- *Visits to agricultural cooperatives.* The question was: "Have you visited an agricultural cooperative?" (Yes = 1, No = 0).

Attitudes

- *Attitudes concerned whether the respondents felt involved in cooperatives.* It can be assumed that a person has a positive attitude to cooperatives if this person has been involved in cooperatives for an extended period of time. Thus, the question was: "I dealt with agricultural cooperation before the Center of Competence was set up (before 2019)" (Yes = 1, No = 0).

Self-evaluation

- The respondents were asked: "Do you consider your knowledge to be sufficient to fulfil this job?" This question concerns whether the respondents felt a need for more knowledge about agricultural cooperation. The response options were: "Yes, I consider my knowledge to be sufficient" and "No, I consider my knowledge insufficient, so I need to learn more."

6 Results

This section presents the results for each of the three propositions in Subsection 4.2. Considering the low numbers in the different subgroups of respondents, advanced statistical analyses are not appropriate, so the presentation is done in the form of tables.

The three dimensions of competence – knowledge, skills, and attitudes – are aggregated into an index in Table 1. The expression "answered affirmatively" means that the respondent answered "yes" rather than "no" and that the respondent had given a correct answer rather than an incorrect one. The percentages represent the respondents' answers to all the questions, i.e. if all respondents had answered correctly and answered "yes" to all questions, the percentage would have been 100.

Proposition 1. The level of competencies of the cooperative experts is limited.

Table 1 shows that the respondents gave affirmative answers to less than half of the questions in all three categories when all questions were assembled into one index. The score for the employees at the Centers of Competence and the regional Ministry representatives was around 40%, while the representatives of the regional public organizations ranked somewhat higher (57%). Considering that the respondents were employed as experts in cooperative business, these figures must be considered to be low. The levels of competence among the various categories of cooperative experts may be affected by the fact that the data were collected shortly after the Federal Project's implementation. These findings concerning limited expertise could be understood at the background that agricultural cooperation did not exist during the many decade with Soviet rule.

Table 1.

Estimate of competence of different categories of cooperative experts and their assessments of their competence.

Responses	Category of cooperative experts			
	Respondents from the Centers of Competence	Respondents from regional offices of the Ministry of Agriculture	Respondents from public organizations dealing with agriculture	All respondents
Number of respondents	54	15	8	77
Share of respondents who answered correctly and “yes” to questions about knowledge, skills, and attitudes (%)	40	38	57	45
Share of respondents who considered their competencies to be sufficient for their job (%)	47	46	56	50

Proposition 2: The cooperative experts have an unclear view of their competencies.

Table 1 indicates that only half of the respondents considered themselves to be sufficiently competent. This figure is remarkably low. The respondents perhaps do not have a clear idea of which qualifications are needed for the job, or they have difficulties to assess how they are performing. The respondents may realize that they have poor competencies, which is seen in Table 2. The figure for employees of public organizations were somewhat higher, perhaps because some of these employees were auditors who have a reason to be informed about factual matters.

Proposition 3: There are differences between how the different categories of cooperative experts scored on the different dimensions of competencies.

Table 2 shows that the respondents’ answers to the questions about the different dimensions of knowledge, skills, and attitudes among experts were widespread:

- *Legal liability of the cooperative members:* Only 9% of the respondents knew what the Federal Law on agricultural cooperation stipulates about members’ legal liability. No one in the group of public administration officers gave a correct answer, presumably because auditors are working with operating cooperatives and not the establishment of new cooperatives.
- *Rules concerning internal governance:* One-third (34%) of the respondents demonstrated knowledge of legal regulations for the internal governance of a cooperative.
- *Minimum number of members:* By far most (93%) respondents knew the minimum number of cooperative members prescribed by federal law.
- *Work in agricultural cooperatives:* Empirical experience of the respondents was scarce, as only 12% of the experts had worked in an agricultural cooperative.
- *Visits to agricultural cooperatives:* A large share of the experts on cooperatives have never visited a cooperative. Only 61% of the respondent have done so, and among the employees at the regional Ministries of Agriculture, the figure was 47%.
- *Motivation to be involved:* Only 30% of respondents had dealt with the topic of agricultural cooperation before they started working for the Federal Project in 2019.

Table 2.

Share of affirmative answers from the respondents to questions about the dimensions of competence (correct answers as opposed to incorrect answers and “yes” answers as opposed to “no” answers).

Dimensions of competence	Respondents from the Centers of Competence	Respondents from regional offices of the Ministry of Agriculture	Respondents from public organizations dealing with agriculture	All respondents
N	54	15	8	77
Legal liability of members (%)	11	7	0	9
Rules concerning governance (%)	27	53	33	33
Minimum number of members (%)	87	93	100	93
Work in cooperatives (%)	13	0	33	12
Visits to cooperatives (%)	64	47	67	61
Motivation (%)	29	27	50	30

The three categories of experts differed in terms of their competence profiles. The respondents at the Ministry had less personal experience of cooperatives, but they ranked higher in terms of administrative knowledge. The auditors and others who were employed in various public organizations seemed to be more practically oriented. A remarkable observation is that all three categories had very low figures for experience of working in a cooperative. Some possible reasons for this are that agricultural cooperatives are few and have not existed for many years. Considering that visits to a cooperative could have been conducted within a few hours or a day, it is surprising that these figures were not close to one hundred percent.

7 Discussion and conclusions

This study explored the competencies of three categories of officials who have the task of promoting the development of agricultural cooperatives in Russia. Based on previous research on competencies, three dimensions were identified, namely knowledge, skills, and attitudes, together with the experts’ view of their own competencies (Ploum et al., 2018). The study showed that these concepts, when operationalized into items in a questionnaire, were usable in the context of Russian cooperative experts.

The empirical study indicates that the general level of competencies among the Russian experts on cooperatives must be considered poor in all three dimensions of competencies. There were, however, differences between the three categories of experts. The group of *advisors to cooperatives* scored poorer on the questions about knowledge, skills and attitudes, while the group of auditors and other *representatives from public organizations* ranked higher, with the *respondents from the Ministry of Agriculture’s* regional offices falling in-between. An interesting observation is that about half of the respondents considered themselves to have sufficient competencies for the job, although their answers to the questionnaire’s other questions indicate the opposite.

The sample of respondents consisted of a large share of the country’s population of cooperative experts; nevertheless, the number of respondents was small. The data collection procedure allowed only a small number of questions to be included in the questionnaire. The study was based on self-reported data from self-selected respondents, so it is impossible to guarantee the correctness of the respondents’ answers or generalize the findings.

The present study is the first one to investigate the competencies of experts on cooperatives, not only in Russia but presumably also internationally. Thus, it is not possible to compare the findings to those of similar studies. The poor competencies of the Russian experts on cooperatives may, however, be related to the conditions for agricultural cooperatives in Russia. After having been banned since the early 1930s (Yanbykh et al., 2019; Wolz et al., 2019), cooperatives were once again allowed after the Russian Federation was established (Golovina and Nilsson, 2009a,b). Thus, at the time this study was conducted, agricultural cooperation had only existed for a few decades. This may explain why there are so few cooperatives and why most of them are weak (Wolz et al., 2016; Maksimov, 2018). The cooperatives are to a large extent dependent upon financial support from the government (Kurakin and Visser, 2017; Sobolev et al., 2018).

These facts may also explain why Russian experts on cooperatives are poorly qualified for their tasks. Their restricted qualifications may likewise be due to few educational programs on cooperatives in the country and a limited amount of domestic research. Due to differences in institutional conditions, Russian experts of cooperatives would have difficulties making use of the international research about cooperatives.

When the results of the empirical investigation (Sections 4-6) are viewed in light of the institutional conditions for agricultural cooperatives in Russia (Sections 1-3), some general conclusions can be drawn. The core problem is the government's view that agricultural cooperatives could be established according to an extreme top-down strategy (Section 2). The governmental establishment's cooperative initiative was unsuccessful, and financial support to cooperatives has likewise been a failure (Section 3). The attempt to promote cooperatives through advisory services to farmers and new established cooperatives is likely to result in another failure, because of the poor competencies among the experts of cooperative businesses.

Thus, the problems of agricultural cooperation depend on the Russian economy's structural attributes, which deviate from those of the Western economies, where cooperatives have been flourishing and still are (Section 2). These problems rest with the political leadership and are beyond the remedy of both the farmers and the cooperative experts.

First, the legal framework for cooperative organization is not adapted to present-day agricultural markets (Hagedorn, 2014; Golovina et al., 2019; Wegren et al., 2019). The *legislation for cooperatives* is largely based on the idea that these firms are collective organizations. In that respect, Russia deviates from countries with a strong cooperative sector. Russian legislation prescribes a traditional cooperative model, while legislation that allows market forces to rule would enable agricultural producers to adapt their cooperatives to different market conditions. The legislation on cooperative is a straightjacket for the Russian farmers who therefore rather involve themselves in informal networking (Golovina et al., 2019).

Second, the agro food value chains, in which the cooperatives operate, are characterized by skewed power relations to the disadvantage to the cooperatives (Belaya and Hanf, 2016). Unlike in other countries, Russia does not have an *antitrust policy* that protects small agribusiness firms from the large agroholdings, who possess considerable power in both upstream and downstream markets as well as political support. Under such market conditions, the marketing problems of cooperatives are more prominent than their production problems.

Third, Russian cooperatives are subject to double taxation in the same manner as investor-owned firms. A *single taxation policy*, which is widespread in the Western World, would entail that farmers benefit more from their involvement in cooperatives. The government would receive lower tax revenue from cooperatives, but the members would receive higher revenues and thus pay higher taxes.

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Notes

ⁱ The Government Decree No. 717 of 14 July 2012 “The state program of agricultural development and regulation of food, agricultural and input markets for the period of 2013 – 2020.”

ⁱⁱ The Presidential Decree No. 204 of 7 May 2018 “About the national goals and strategic purposes of development of Russian Federation till the year 2024.”

ⁱⁱⁱ “Creation of the system of farmer support and agricultural cooperation development” of 15 October 2018.

- ^{iv} State program of agricultural development and regulation of food, agricultural, and input markets for the period of 2013–2020.
- ^v The Presidential Decree No. 204 of 7 May 2018 “About the national goals and strategic purposes of development of Russian Federation till the year 2024,” and the Federal Project of 15 October 2018, entitled “Creation of the system of farmer support and agricultural cooperation development.”