

Private Peasants and Socialist Authorities

Successful Grassroots Initiative in Slovenia in the 1960s

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Abstract. This article presents the successful grassroots initiative of Slovenian peasants in Juršinci in socialist Slovenia in the 1960s and sheds light on the broader economic and political background. In Slovenia in the 1960s, the rise of a younger, more liberal faction within the Communist Party led to political and economic liberalization. The agricultural cooperatives, which were supposed to attract private peasants to voluntarily collaborate in the social sector by providing services such as mechanization, seed supply, chemical agents, and expertise, failed in this respect and increasingly alienated the peasants. This led to a decline in peasant membership in the cooperatives. Under these circumstances, peasants began to organize themselves, form their own communities, and make their demands to the authorities, which the liberal government finally met in the early 1970s.

Keywords: peasant grassroots initiatives, socialist agriculture, cooperatives, Slovenia, liberalism, 1960s

Introduction

Few studies in international scholarship have focused on successful bottom-up peasant initiatives in state-socialist European countries after World War II. However, cases in which peasants were successful in stretching the limits of the system and the system tolerated or even incorporated their ideas into its agricultural policies, did exist. Stephan Merl argues in his article “Sovietization in the Economy and Agriculture” that the only reason European socialist command economies survived for four decades was their correction mechanisms, namely the corrupt practices that enabled people to survive.¹ Peasants were also engaged in the efforts to circumvent or bypass the rigidity of the system. In certain cases, their practices, which were on the verge of legality or completely illegal (but not in the sense of corruption), were eventually legalized. Perhaps this was due to the fact that, as Merl points out, Soviet-style collective agriculture was not transferred to the countries of Eastern Europe in

1 Merl, “Sovietization in the Economy and Agriculture,” 1.

the way the command economy was. He stresses that the economic culture in those countries lacked the prerequisites for the adoption of this model. Peasants perceived land as private property, and those with small or medium-sized farms were expected to resist joining collective farms. The way kolkhozes functioned (unpaid forced labour) was therefore never transferred, and the form of collective agriculture was adapted to each country's economic and cultural conditions.² In their search for the right model, governments had to repeatedly correct agricultural policy, adapting it to the emerging shortcomings, and above all, had to skilfully navigate between ideological imperatives and the need for productivity and food security. In such conditions, decision-makers were sometimes willing to accept practices developed by peasants or cooperatives, even if they were semi-legal, illegal, or ideologically problematic, but proved productive.

Zsuzsanna Varga analyses the practices of Hungarian cooperatives, which differed from the officially prescribed model of a cooperative in the way peasants received their remuneration. She stresses that the authorities tolerated some local practices, even those that had previously been perceived as feudal relics, because they boosted the peasants' motivation and resulted in improved production. Many of those practices were finally legalized.³ In her study on the Árpád Cooperative in Szentes, she presents the case of a cooperative with an "outwardly socialist but inwardly (in terms of several of its elements) individual horticulture system," that was tolerated by the authorities.⁴ She shows that, in Hungary, such practices were supported by changes in agricultural policy in the mid-1960s. Similar phenomena were noticeable in socialist Slovenia. The political and economic liberalization in Slovenia during the 1960s led, in the early 1970s, to the legalization of several peasant ideas, demands, and established farming practices that had previously been politically unacceptable. This article will present an example of a successful bottom-up peasants' initiative. It started as a bold move, inconsistent with the ideological framework of the time, but was supported by the authorities and legalized a few years later. This story will be placed in a wider political-economic context that explains the success of the initiative.

The central argument of this article is that the relative openness and ideological flexibility of the Slovenian socialist authorities in the 1960s, combined with grassroots organizing by peasants in response to the systemic lack of support for the modernization of private agriculture, created conditions under which bottom-up initiatives could meaningfully influence agricultural policy. While access to mechanization was one of the key motivations, self-organization also drew on

2 Merl, "Sovietization in the Economy and Agriculture," 1–15.

3 Varga, "Agricultural Economics"; Varga, "Three waves of collectivization"; Varga, "The twentieth century rural development."

4 Varga, "Practices of Creative Disobedience," 450.

the long-standing tradition of cooperative practices and local solidarity in rural Slovenia. Paradoxically, although the socialist authorities emphasized values such as solidarity and collective benefit, it was precisely the cooperative structures that peasants perceived as obstructive rather than supportive in this regard. Their initiatives thus emerged not only from a practical need but also from a sense that real cooperation and progress could be achieved more effectively through autonomous community-based efforts. The peasant initiative presented here as a case study was one of the earliest and most significant examples of such bottom-up mobilization and, at the same time, part of a broader phenomenon that gradually reshaped the boundaries of socialist agricultural policy in Slovenia. The contribution is based on primary sources, including the archival collection of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Slovenia⁵ and the archives of the Cooperative Union of Slovenia; printed sources, such as Edvard Kardelj's book *The Problems of Socialist Policy in the Countryside*, which laid the foundations of Yugoslav agricultural policy following the abandonment of forced collectivization; the relevant literature; and a conversation with Simon Toplak, a peasant who played a key role in the successful bottom-up peasant initiative presented in the article.

Enterprising peasants in Juršinci

Juršinci is a municipality located in the hilly region of Slovenske Gorice in north-eastern Slovenia. It is still among the least developed areas in the country, with a predominantly agrarian population and high unemployment rates. Residents have been involved in viticulture, fruit growing, livestock farming, arable farming, and rootstock grafting. Given the area's topography, there are no large agricultural complexes; instead, smaller fragmented plots prevail. In 1905, the first rootstock grafting cooperative in Austria–Hungary, known as the Juršinci Grafting Cooperative, was established there. At that time, vineyards in Slovenia were plagued by phylloxera, and grafting local grape varieties onto American rootstocks resistant to this pest proved to be an effective solution. The cooperative connected the grafters in the area and operated continuously until 1941. During World War II, its activities ceased, but its members managed to maintain the production of grafted vines.⁶ Immediately after the war, they established a grafting section within the newly formed Fruit and

5 The Socialist Alliance of Working People (*Socialistična zveza delovnega ljudstva*) was the largest socio-political organization in socialist Yugoslavia, formally separate from the Communist Party and designed as a broad platform to facilitate the participation of various social groups. Each Yugoslav republic had its own republican-level branch of the Socialist Alliance responsible for addressing local and republic-specific issues.

6 Toplak and Toplak, "Sedanje vodenje zadrug," 146; Personal archive of Simon Toplak.

Grafting Cooperative in Juršinci, which had twenty-two members at the time. This section operated with considerable autonomy until 1960, when, as part of the merger of cooperatives and the establishment of large agro-combines, the Juršinci cooperative joined the Jože Lacko Agricultural Cooperative in Ptuj. At that time, the section was dissolved, and the cooperative abandoned this activity, uprooting about 10 hectares of mother vineyards in Juršinci. In the following years, some grafters retained their work to a limited extent as cooperators (contractual partners) with various agricultural cooperatives and combines in Ptuj, Radgona, Ljutomer, and Ormož.⁷

Although the planting material act stipulated that only the social sector⁸ of agriculture could produce seeds and seedlings, and not private peasants, grape growers considered how they could operate as a community under the given circumstances, rather than just as individual cooperators. Simon Toplak recalls how, in 1966, at the initiative of his father, Ivan Janez Toplak, who had been an important contributor to the pre-war grafting cooperative, former members of the grafting section gathered:

“We came together to reunite and work collaboratively—so that Juršinci would be recognized and we wouldn’t just be cooperators everywhere.”⁹

The peasants of Juršinci wanted to operate collectively, following the principles of pre-war cooperatives, rather than merely acting as isolated contractual contributors to large-scale cooperatives and combines, which had distanced themselves from the peasants. They rejected the atomization imposed by these institutions and, instead, sought to restore small-scale, community-driven cooperation, where peasants could actively participate in decision-making, rather than being reduced to individual contractors subjected to the centralized policies of the cooperatives and combines. In the interview, Simon Toplak emphasizes that there was a strong desire for solidarity, education, and progress. Although they were formally not allowed to establish a community or organize as private producers the production of grafted vines outside the social sector, the director of the Jože Lacko Agricultural Cooperative in Ptuj, Milan Koren, enabled them to organize as a grafting section within the aforementioned cooperative. Simon Toplak became the president of the section, which consisted of fourteen members. Formally, they placed themselves within the system, but due to the cooperative’s understanding, they had considerable autonomy. Most importantly, they did not perceive themselves as individual cooperators within the grape growers’ section, but more as a community that made independent decisions

7 Toplak and Toplak, “Sedanje vodenje zadrug,” 146; Personal archive of Simon Toplak.

8 The social sector in Yugoslavia referred to enterprises and cooperatives under ‘social ownership,’ a form of collective ownership in which the means of production were neither privately owned nor directly state-owned, but rather held collectively by society and managed by workers through a system of self-management.

9 Interview with Simon Toplak, 25 August 2023.

about their shared work (within the boundaries of the system). In 1966, the section grafted 150,000 grape seedlings, and from that year on, both the number of members and the production of grafted vines increased year by year. In 1970, they grafted 250,000, the following year 350,000, and by 1972, the number had gone up to 600,000. They later received numerous awards for their work.¹⁰

But this was not all. In 1964, Simon Toplak, with seven other peasants from Juršinci, signed an agricultural cooperation agreement. Based on pre-war civil law, the contract skilfully used a loophole in the legislation. It was concluded between private individuals on common agricultural cooperation, although Slovenian legislation allowed the cooperation of private peasants only through cooperatives that were part of the social sector.¹¹ The basis of this contract, the General Civil Code, was adopted by an imperial patent on 1 June 1811. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia declared legal succession after World War I, retaining the previously applicable legislation. After World War II, Yugoslavia repealed all legal regulations issued before 6 April 1941. However, legal provisions from regulations issued prior to that date could still be applied to relationships not governed by current regulations, provided they did not conflict with the new constitutional framework.¹²

The peasants then notarized this agreement to give it more validity and sent it to some of the most prominent politicians and decision-makers. They made sure to use appropriate language, stating in the contract that they were pooling labour and resources, which was the terminology of the Yugoslav self-management system at the time. Simon Toplak remembers:

“Until 1964, a peasant was not allowed to get a tractor because it represented a threat to socialism. Therefore, any tractor from the agricultural cooperative or the socialist economy had to go to the scrapyard to be destroyed in front of the eyes of the commission so that the peasant could not get his hands on it. But we [...], eight peasants, signed a contract, saying that we were pooling our labour and resources. [...] We sent this agreement, signed and notarized, to the Central Committee in Ljubljana and for information to Popit, Kraigher, and Marinc¹³, and to Simonič, the Minister of Agriculture.”¹⁴

10 Personal archive of Simon Toplak, interview with Simon Toplak, 2 November 2022, interview with Simon Toplak, 25 August 2023.

11 Personal archive of Simon Toplak, interview with Simon Toplak, 2 November 2022, interview with Simon Toplak, 25 August 2023.

12 Obči državljanski zakonik.

13 France Popit, Boris Kraigher and Andrej Marinc were among the most prominent Slovenian politicians, who, during socialist Yugoslavia, held various important positions in both Slovenian and Yugoslav politics at various times.

14 Interview with Simon Toplak, 25 August 2023.

The unexpected part came when:

“The savings and credit department of the cooperative [...] in Ptuj was instructed to grant a low-interest loan to this farming community for the purchase of a new tractor. So, we got a new Ferguson tractor, small, thirty-three horsepower, trailer, plough, harrows, scythe, sprayer. The whole kit. [...] I was the president of this farming community, and I was also the tractor driver. [...] We worked the entire parish with that tractor—mowing, ploughing, and so on. We worked day and night. One person worked from midnight to noon, the other from noon to midnight. I had one hour for a snack and for changing oil.”¹⁵

The next step was lobbying—they asked Dr. Emil Čeferin, who was preparing the new cooperative law in the early 1970s, to include the peasants’ community in the law as the lowest form of peasant cooperation.¹⁶ In June 1972, the new Slovenian Act on the Association of Peasants entered into force. It was the first agricultural law in Yugoslavia independently adopted by a republic after Yugoslavia had started decentralization and delegated more jurisdiction to the republics at the beginning of the 1970s. This act legalized the peasants’ community as their lowest form of association. Peasants’ communities, according to this law, were not legal entities. Peasants contributed their resources to the community based on a contract for the joint production, processing, or marketing of their products; for the acquisition of agricultural machinery or reproductive materials for their own needs; for the shared use of agricultural machinery or facilities; or for collaboration with other enterprises. Peasants were co-owners of these resources, and income was shared according to the contributions made or resources invested.¹⁷ The law also explicitly stated:

“A farming community is established on the basis of the rules of civil law by means of a contract by which two or more peasants permanently pool their labour or their resources for the common benefit.”¹⁸

The legislator legalized the form of peasants’ association as proposed/designed by the peasants themselves. On this legal basis, the vine grafting section within the cooperative was transformed into the Community of Grafters and Tree Nurserymen of Juršinci in 1973 (in 1992, it was re-established as the Grafters’ Cooperative of Juršinci).¹⁹ This was a clearly bottom-up idea transfer. But in order to understand why and how this happened, the wider background and context must be explained.

15 Interview with Simon Toplak, 25 August 2023.

16 Interview with Simon Toplak, 25 August 2023.

17 Archive of Cooperative Union of Slovenia, Kmečke skupnosti in posebne organizacije združenega dela po zakonu o združevanju kmetov, 1–2.

18 Zakon o združevanju kmetov, 659.

19 Personal archive of Simon Toplak, interview with Simon Toplak, 25 August 2023.

Peasant cooperation—the Yugoslav way

Coerced collectivization in Yugoslavia started in 1949 after the Tito–Stalin dispute in 1948, in which Yugoslavia was accused of not following the right path. The collectivization, which had been frozen in 1951 and finally abandoned in 1953, was a complete failure. In June 1951, there were only 381 so-called peasant working cooperatives (where peasants had to invest all their productive means except a small house plot, a small inventory, and some livestock) in Slovenia. Only 10.7 percent of arable land or 2.6 percent of all agricultural land, and just 5 percent of the peasant population in Slovenia were included. Economically, these cooperatives had very low productivity. The authorities soon realized that collectivization was not working and that it would be difficult to achieve higher productivity in this way. The only realistic alternative would have been to increase coercion, which would almost certainly trigger a revolt among the peasants. As a result, they decided to abandon collectivization. After its abandonment, peasants could leave the peasant working cooperatives with no repercussions and reclaim their land.²⁰

After this failed attempt, it was necessary to appease the peasants and gain their trust. As a solution, the authorities offered them so-called ‘cooperation’: peasants retained property rights over their land but participated in production through the cooperative. Cooperation had been introduced into agriculture since the abandonment of collectivization, but this new path was formally confirmed by the resolution of the Federal People’s Assembly in 1957, which stipulated that agricultural policy would henceforth be implemented without violent interference with individual land ownership. The peasants’ right to pursue their own economic interests was recognized, and so was the economic potential of private agriculture. The need for large-scale investment in agriculture was no longer questioned. In Slovenia, for example, the value of investments in agriculture increased nearly 8,000-fold in the decade between 1952 and 1962.²¹

The creator of this policy was the Slovenian politician Edvard Kardelj, who set the path for the further development of agricultural policy in Yugoslavia in a series of talks, lectures, and a book entitled *Problemi socialistične politike na vasi* (The Problems of Socialist Policy in the Countryside). The core idea was to gradually draw peasants into the social sector by considering their economic interests and using as little coercion as possible. Thereby, the authorities wanted to ensure improved production and higher labour productivity while maintaining political stability in the countryside. Kardelj argued that the peasants’ political support for socialism was closely related to their material and social position. As these goals

20 Lazarević, Rendla, and Sedlaček, *Zgodovina združništva v Sloveniji*, 172–78.

21 Lazarević, *Delo in zemlja, male študije kmečkega sveta*.

could only be achieved by raising agricultural productivity, they could expect the peasants' support and their own initiative only in those forms of socialist economic relations that would lead to greater productivity and material results. The peasants should be able to take their own decisions according to their individual interests, as long as they were consistent with the common social objectives. The socialist community would 'help them' in decision-making, but without forcefully changing property relations or creating or artificially maintaining economic relations that did not have enough economic power to sustain themselves.²²

The leading force for gradually drawing peasants into the social sector would then be their own interest. This was in accordance with the concept of the Soviet agrarian economist, Alexander Vasilyevich Chayanov, who assumed that 'working peasants' would voluntarily join cooperatives because they would understand that only in this way could they intensify production and increase their standard of living. With modernization, the efficiency of peasant production would increase, while through cooperatives the authorities would control agricultural accumulation.²³ But the final goal remained unchanged:

"The purpose of our socialist policy in the countryside is singular and unchanging: the reconstruction of agriculture through the establishment of large socialist production units capable of organizing the social labour process on the basis of modern technology and scientific knowledge, while gradually socializing the land."²⁴

The Slovenian economic and agrarian historian Žarko Lazarević captured the essence of the new approach when he argued that "these changes were more in the attitude towards the peasants than in the agricultural policy itself."²⁵

In contrast to the immediate socialization of the land, Kardelj emphasized the socialization of the labour process and other labour resources. All other working resources that were seen as important for highly productive modern agricultural production, such as mechanization, chemical fertilizers, high-quality seeds, and expertise, would be offered to private peasants through cooperatives. The social sector would also set an example to private peasants in modernization and raising productivity, thus motivating peasants to join. The main means of collaboration between peasants and the social sector was the so-called 'cooperation.' Cooperation was "any form of production cooperation of socialist economic organizations—agricultural estates, peasant working cooperatives, general agricultural cooperatives and their

22 Kardelj, *Problemi socialistične politike na vasi*, 7–8.

23 Lazarević, Rendla, and Sedlaček, *Zgodovina združništva v Sloveniji*.

24 Kardej, *Problemi socialistične politike na vasi*, 7.

25 Lazarević, *Delo in zemlja, male študije kmečkega sveta*.

economies, and in certain cases even industrial and trade organizations—with individual peasant farms.”²⁶ The social sector would provide the most important means of production (except land) and accumulate the means of extended reproduction. In this transitional period of socialism, private landownership would be tolerated, but the production process would be gradually more socialized. The basic method of income distribution should be division according to work invested (socialist principle) and not according to land ownership. A gradual shift should occur away from the notion that land is the main means of production towards the idea that land is only one condition for agricultural production.²⁷

In practice, cooperation could take many different forms, as it was the outcome of an individual agreement between a private peasant and a legal form of social agriculture (most often a cooperative). It could take the form of the most basic cooperation, in which a peasant committed to delivering a certain amount of crops, and in return, the cooperative offered certain services (seeds, fertilizers, professional help, etc., depending on the agreement) as credit for those crops. Even more basic was cooperation when the cooperative charged peasants for these services or paid for their crops. Cooperation could also take a so-called ‘higher form.’ In this case, the peasant and the cooperative agreed on joint production and income sharing (how and what again depended on each individual agreement). For example, the cooperative would help the peasant with its machinery and/or take care of mechanical fertilization or spraying against pests; in return, the peasant would contribute his own work and use his tools; and finally they would share the income. The land was incorporated in the calculations as rent. A special form of cooperation was possible in the field of animal husbandry. The cooperative would buy the animals and their feed and take care of insurance, while the peasant would breed the animals to a certain weight. They would then share the net income.²⁸ Peasants were free to dispose of the remaining produce for which there was no cooperation agreement, selling it outside the cooperative.

Cooperatives were also expected to abandon non-agricultural activities and focus all their energies on agricultural production. Their management and internal structure were expected to become more similar to that of a company. Kardelj envisaged a director or manager at the head of the cooperative with responsibilities and methods of appointment similar to those in companies. Management rights (voting rights in the cooperative’s bodies) of cooperative workers and peasants-members

26 Kardelj, *Problemi socialistične politike na vasi*, 125.

27 AS 537, Republiška konferenca Socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, Referati in razprave 8. plenarne seje GO o kmetijskem združništvu, 8.

28 Kardelj, *Problemi socialistične politike na vasi*, 213–18.

of the cooperative were to be equalized.²⁹ At the same time, in order to prevent the “reproduction of capitalist relations,” the maximum ownership of arable land was reduced from 35 hectares to 10 hectares in 1953, when collectivization was abolished.³⁰ Initially, the new regime showed promising results. Agricultural cooperatives were revived and peasants were ready to join them. By the end of 1957, 94,000 individual private farmsteads were members of cooperatives, constituting the majority of private farms.³¹

Growing alienation between cooperatives and their members

In line with Kardelj’s vision, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, cooperatives increasingly began to resemble enterprises in terms of their internal organization. The influence of workers employed in cooperatives was growing, while peasants were gradually losing their say in management. There were several factors behind these changes. One of them was the agenda that, eventually, agriculture would become an industrial branch and peasants would become workers. Another factor was the desire for the political consolidation of cooperatives. As Franc Simonič noted in the debate on cooperatives in the Socialist Union of the Working People of Slovenia in 1958:

“It is crucial that we strengthen the staff in the cooperatives. [...] The search for personnel has shown that we will not get suitable personnel for the cooperatives, although we would need several hundred for the entire area of Slovenia. We have seen that the main solution is to find politically mature, honest people, who will then be trained at shorter or longer annual seminars, mainly in the winter.”³²

The quote shows that political affiliation and integrity were more important than expertise. Edvard Kardelj’s words from the same year testify to the fact that at the end of the 1950s the authorities still feared the peasant’s power. Kardelj emphasized that “the position of the peasant in the cooperative is very strong, so strong that the peasant gradually extorts.” He added that “the peasant is interested in cooperation because he knows that he will get more resources through it. At the same time, he is also interested in ensuring that he, rather than the society, gets the lion’s share in the

29 Kardelj, *Problemi socialistične politike na vasi*, 198.

30 Čepič, “Oris pojavnih oblik kmetijske politike v letih 1945–1960,” 32.

31 AS 537, Republiška konferenca Socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, Referati in razprave 8. plenarne seje GO o kmetijskem združništvu, 3.

32 AS 537, Republiška konferenca Socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, Referati in razprave 8. plenarne seje GO o kmetijskem združništvu.

cooperation. That is why it is necessary for the society to establish some obstacles, some administrative means that will strengthen the position of our cooperatives in contracts with individual peasants.³³

The internal reorganization of cooperatives started with the 1954 regulation on agricultural cooperatives, which stipulated that any worker or employee permanently employed by a cooperative could become a cooperative member. Admission to the cooperative could not be denied.³⁴ This granted cooperative employees the right to participate in decision-making and hold positions within cooperative bodies—something that had been impossible before. By the early 1960s, the general assembly—once the main governing body of the cooperative—was left with only minimal authority. It could review the cooperative's work and make recommendations to the cooperative council, but the council was not obliged to implement these recommendations.³⁵ In 1965, the Basic Law on Agricultural Cooperatives was passed, marking the peak of the cooperative's alignment with socialist enterprises. Employees now held absolute dominance in decision-making bodies. The key entity was the 'working community,' composed of both employees and cooperative members. By 1968, of the 1,449 total members of cooperative councils, only 432 were actual cooperative members, and of the 432 members of administrative boards, just 144 were cooperative members.³⁶

After 1959, cooperatives gradually merged and consolidated into larger complexes or 'kombinat' systems, shifting their focus toward collective production. This led to an even greater loss of contact with their membership. Processing units within the cooperatives became independent social enterprises, and the cooperatives were required to abandon their forestry operations. Cooperatives grew into large organizations, increasingly focused on their own production. Simple forms of cooperation predominated, and cooperatives were unable to provide machinery under conditions favourable to peasants. Although the private sector still provided a significant share of food production, the prevailing belief was that the social sector would soon meet all food needs. This resulted in the neglect of the private agricultural sector, which in turn widened the productivity gap between the private and social sectors. This situation contributed to a gradual decline in interest in agriculture in rural areas and accelerated the migration of young people away from the countryside. Due to the subordinate position of peasants and frequent breaches of cooperation

33 AS 537, Republiška konferenca Socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, Referati in razprave 8. plenarne seje GO o kmetijskem združništvu, 13.

34 Archive of the Cooperative Union of Slovenia, Pregled predpisov in razvoja kmetijskega združništva v Sloveniji od 1945 do 1989, 37–38.

35 Čeferin and Avsec, *Združništvo pri nas in v nekaterih evropskih državah*, 53.

36 Avsec, *Združništvo pri nas in v nekaterih evropskih državah*, 56–57.

agreements, trust in the cooperatives diminished. The number of cooperatives and their membership sharply declined from 695, with 126,000 members and 70 percent of farm households involved in 1956 to only seventy-eight cooperatives with 48,000 members in 1965. By 1968, their number had further dropped to just sixty-two, with a significant decrease in membership as well.³⁷ While the decline in the number of cooperatives was primarily due to mergers and consolidation, the falling membership pointed to increasing alienation between peasants and cooperatives, and a growing loss of trust in the latter.

In 1962, teams from the Central Committee of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Slovenia visited selected agricultural cooperatives and prepared an extensive survey. They reported that the majority of cooperatives had only small cooperative estates, where modern production was not possible, and noted the poor progress in land acquisition.³⁸ They reported significant financial shortfalls in the machinery sector due to unprofitable practices in providing services to peasants in some cooperatives, due to poorly developed cooperation with private peasants, as well as instances of selling tractors to private peasants because they proved unprofitable within the cooperatives. The cooperatives practiced almost exclusively the simplest forms of cooperation with peasants (purchase, sale of reproductive material, and machinery services), and only in rare cases was there joint production with profit-sharing. There were slightly more advanced forms of cooperation in the breeding of calves and pigs. The increase in agricultural product prices did not favour cooperation either, as peasants who sold their products under contract with the cooperative received lower prices than those who sold them freely. As a result, peasants often sold their products directly to consumers, through private intermediaries, or to companies authorized to purchase products directly. The report highlights:

“In the agricultural cooperative in Lendava, it was calculated that intermediaries sold over 100 million dinars worth of livestock from their area at fairs in Čakovec, while more than 150 wagons of potatoes were sold to other buyers rather than through the Agricultural Cooperative in Trebnje, etc.”³⁹

37 Lazarević, Rendla, and Sedlaček, *Zgodovina združništva v Sloveniji*, 184.

38 Cooperatives were expected not only to collaborate with private peasants but also to develop and expand their own socially owned estates. These were intended to serve as models of modern, mechanized production and gradually absorb more land—either through voluntary sale or in accordance with the long-term expectation that private ownership would progressively lose its significance as over time, socially owned agriculture was to be perceived as a more rational and collectively beneficial mode of production.

39 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631.6, GO-SZDL: Informacija o nekaterih problemih KZ, Informacija o združništvu (Lj., november 1962).

In some cases, peasants simply did not adhere to their contracts and, despite the agreements, sold their surplus outside the cooperative.

“For instance, in Koper, 1,300 cooperative peasants sold their contracted surpluses on the market, leaving the cooperative powerless, as it was impossible to legally compel those 1,300 to fulfil their obligations.”⁴⁰

The report acknowledges that “cooperation typically does not yield satisfactory results.” It also observed that “the cooperative staff tend to view the issue of cooperation as merely a social obligation.”⁴¹ Regarding the development of self-management, it is reported that workers in many cooperatives still had insufficient influence and that, in some cooperative councils, a “private small-ownership mentality” was prevalent. However, it is noted that “almost all cooperatives now have independent basic organizations of the Communist League,” indicating some improvement in this regard. At the same time, it was also observed that the cooperative leadership did not sufficiently engage members in the active operation of the cooperative, that general assemblies had lost their significance, and that the cooperatives had grown so large that holding assemblies was practically impossible.⁴² At the end of 1961, due to mergers, there were only 146 cooperatives. Within the cooperatives’ activities, their own production accounted for 5.3 percent, higher forms of cooperation contributed a mere 4.2 percent, and machine services 4.5 percent. The largest share—nearly 64 percent—was accounted for by the purchase of agricultural products; a little over 22 percent constituted other activities. The cooperatives faced significant losses concerning their agricultural land and machinery. Thus, as is evident from this data, adjusting the prices paid to peasants for their produce was the most viable means available to cooperatives for addressing their losses. The challenges in mechanization arose from the poor quality of domestic machinery and unused tractor attachments, as peasants were mainly interested in ploughing and preferred to handle other tasks themselves. Furthermore, the cooperatives faced regular delays in obtaining spare parts for broken machines, which frequently remained idle while waiting for replacements. Additional difficulties included the necessity to charge too little for machine services to keep prices acceptable for peasants, along with the fragmentation of

40 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631.6, GO-SZDL: Informacija o nekaterih problemih KZ, Informacija o združništvu (Lj., november 1962).

41 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631.6, GO-SZDL: Informacija o nekaterih problemih KZ, Informacija o združništvu (Lj., november 1962).

42 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631.6, GO-SZDL: Informacija o nekaterih problemih KZ, Informacija o združništvu (Lj., november 1962).

small agricultural parcels, resulting in difficulties in tractor farming on these plots. Regarding cooperation, peasants entered contracts for very small areas, averaging between 0.45 and 1.86 hectares, according to a survey conducted in ten cooperatives.⁴³

Another study conducted in 1963 on agriculture in the municipalities of Domžale and Črnomelj also had some interesting findings. Domžale was industrially well-developed, while Črnomelj was among the least industrially developed municipalities. In both municipalities, there was a significant percentage of so-called mixed households—in 58 percent of the surveyed farming households, one or two members were employed outside agriculture, even in villages that were relatively far from municipal centres. The research indicated a decline in the number of individuals in households after 1948, particularly after 1955, with young people leaving the farms. The agricultural workforce decreased from an average of 2.1 in 1955 to merely 1.5 individuals.⁴⁴

Machinery was a special issue. Although agricultural mechanization was one of the pillars of agricultural policy aimed at linking private peasants to the social sector, and private ownership of machinery was explicitly prohibited, over time an increasing number of tractors and other equipment gradually found their way into private hands. Mostly the cooperatives sold their old, retired cooperative tractors to private peasants. This issue was addressed in 1962 in a general meeting of the Central Cooperative Union of Slovenia by the Slovenian Prime Minister Viktor Avbelj. He stated:

“Many comrades are not consistent in their actions, even though they understand the situation. In order to make farming more efficient and to earn some money, they are willing to sell machinery to private individuals.”⁴⁵

As an example, he mentioned the sale of tractors and chainsaws:

“Groups of peasants are gathering around such machinery and believe that the cooperative is no longer necessary for them. However, we should remember that a socialist society will not allow means of production to remain in private hands.”⁴⁶

43 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631.6, GO-SZDL: Informacija o nekaterih problemih KZ, Informacija o zadružništvu (Lj., november 1962).

44 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, Materialna gibanja v kmetijstvu v občini Domžale in Črnomelj.

45 “Posestva in zadruge – za vse je dovolj dela pri preobrazbi vasi,” 2.

46 “Posestva in zadruge – za vse je dovolj dela pri preobrazbi vasi,” 2.

The problem was even more severe near the border with Italy. Already in 1956, Tine Remškar reported at the Republic Conference of the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Slovenia that in the Vipava district in the west of Slovenia, there was an “accumulation of funds among peasants, which we are unable to accumulate through various measures—with the services of our cooperatives, etc.—and we are unable to achieve this even through taxes, although this year’s tax levies reached the maximum imposed.” He reported that peasants were buying various agricultural machines from Italy, as well as copper sulphate, which was used as a herbicide, fungicide, and pesticide, and was cheaper in Italy.⁴⁷

Peasant communities

In such circumstances, during the second half of the 1960s, peasants began to self-organize in various ways. They started forming different communities, including production and machinery communities, and mutual insurance groups. These often took the form of societies to comply with legal regulations, although they did not align with the ideological framework. Additionally, agricultural and livestock societies for mutual assistance began to emerge.⁴⁸ In the sources reviewed, surprisingly little attention is given to this phenomenon. Only scattered fragments in written sources reflect that, indeed, this happened. For instance, a report titled Peasant Communities and Special Organizations of Collective Work According to the Act on the Association of Peasants, preserved in the archives of the Cooperative Union of Slovenia, states:

“Numerous machinery communities had already been established by peasants even before their formation and organization were legally regulated. The economic necessity for more rational utilization, due to the distinctly seasonal use of agricultural machinery, along with the possibility of acquiring larger farming equipment, has compelled peasants to unite.”⁴⁹

The extent of this (self-)organization among peasants is reflected in another expert opinion from 1972 or the first half of 1973, stored in the archives of the Cooperative Union. Its author writes:

“Interestingly, according to the Cooperative Union’s data, we already have over 230 machinery communities (with 130 more planned); production

47 AS 537, Republiška konferenca Socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, Referati in razprave 8. plenarne seje GO o kmetijskem združništvu.

48 Interview with Simon Toplak.

49 Archives of Cooperative Union of Slovenia, Kmečke skupnosti in posebne organizacije združenega dela po zakonu o združevanju kmetov, 2.

communities are being formed for the renewal of vineyards, orchards, and hop fields; the establishment of a grazing community is underway; peasants are demanding and preparing for the establishment of a shared barn in the form of a special farm community; peasants have already established dairy communities for equipping milk collection centres and for other tasks related to dairy and livestock farming. In short, driven by economic necessity and with the support of society and agricultural organizations, peasants are spontaneously connecting in various forms of mutual cooperation and collaboration with working organizations.”

Since the document was created after the law had been passed legalizing these communities, it is unclear how many of the mentioned 230 machinery communities and other communities were established before the law. However, most probably the majority were, as the document was written shortly after its adoption. Additionally, a few lines later, the author notes that “these communities must also comply with the law by 8 June 1973” (which was the legally mandated deadline for the existing communities to adjust to the provisions of the law).⁵⁰

In response to this self-organization of peasants and the general situation in agriculture, Slovenian authorities began addressing issues in the private agricultural sector in the second half of the 1960s. In 1968, a serious in-depth discussion on the state of the private agricultural sector emerged within the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Slovenia. Private peasants participated in this discussion, sharing their ideas and voicing their demands. For the first time since World War II, the private peasant became a political actor, with a real possibility of influencing agricultural policy. The conclusions of the discussions were subsequently addressed at the highest levels of the Slovenian government and parliament. In 1972, many of the private peasants’ demands were formally recognized in the Slovenian Law on Peasant Associations. But before we address this, it is important to highlight some of the broader economic and political developments in Slovenia during the 1960s.

Self-management, liberalism of the 1960s, and the 1965 economic reform

In the early 1950s, Yugoslavia abandoned central planning and replaced it with the so-called self-management system, encapsulated in the slogan ‘Factories to the Workers.’ Workers were eventually given responsibility for the management of the

50 Archives of Cooperative Union of Slovenia, Posebnosti pri izvajanju ustavnih amandmajev na področju kmetijstva, 29.

means of production and the results of their labour through workers' councils within enterprises. Instead of state ownership, the means of production were redefined as common public property, i.e., social ownership. At the same time, within the framework of the plan, self-management introduced the 'operation of the law of value.' In practice, however, the reform was only partially implemented. Thus, elements of the centrally planned system persisted alongside certain aspects of a market economy.⁵¹ In the following years, self-management extended to virtually all areas of social life, becoming the foundation of the new political system in Yugoslavia. At its core, there was the idea of shared decision-making regarding the allocation of the results produced in every sphere of society. This initiated a profound transformation of the political system, moving towards greater democratization and decentralization (within the limits of the system).⁵²

For understanding the processes presented in this article, it is crucial to grasp how people gradually internalized the idea of self-management. In the words of sociologist Gregor Tomc:

“Although, at a practical level, there was not much change after the normative adoption of self-management (real decision-making still remained in the hands of the state, and directors were responsible for production and operations within the framework of central planning), it would be overly simplistic to claim that self-management functioned merely as a new basis for the regime's ideological legitimacy. The slogans that swept across the country (workers' self-management, de-bureaucratization, decentralization, the dwindling of the state and the party, etc.) were indeed ideological constructs. Yet, despite this, they gradually became the assumptions upon which people thought and acted, taking them as part of reality, not just as something entirely fictional. Because this fiction, despite frequent elaborations, remained relatively stable at its core, acting based on these foundations gradually transformed actual relationships. Structures initially intended as purely formal came to life: autonomy of action emerged where a simple transmission of orders had been intended, and conflicts arose even though the system presupposed harmonious relations. This process was, of course, very gradual and continued to gain momentum until the end of the 1960s.”⁵³

51 Prinčič, “Oblikovanje koncepta novega gospodarskega sistema in politika ključne kapitalne graditve v letu 1951,” 200–205; Prinčič, “Gospodarska reforma iz julija 1965: najresnejši in najboljše pripravljen poskus korenite preobrazbe jugoslovanskega gospodarstva,” 217–19.

52 Čepič, “Jugoslovanske reforme v šestdesetih letih,” 45–63.

53 Tomc, “Planiranje v Jugoslaviji,” 21–22.

Additionally, in the 1960s, a younger faction of the communists took the lead in Slovenia, bringing a wave of liberalism and preparing a significant economic reform. After several years during which Yugoslavia's economic growth was among the highest in the world, the 1960s began with an economic slowdown, bottoming out in the summer of 1961. This downturn came as a shock and a warning to Yugoslav economists and politicians, highlighting that even the Yugoslav type of socialism was not immune to such economic fluctuations. In response, in 1961, the rejuvenated party leadership sought to regulate the domestic market, balance foreign trade, and grant enterprises more autonomy in managing their earnings. However, this effort also stalled halfway toward deeper liberalization.⁵⁴ In 1965, the third and more serious economic reform was introduced. This liberal wing of the Communist Party (in Slovenia and in some other republics) envisioned a more democratic political and economic structure for Yugoslavia. A Slovene, Boris Kraigher, a key figure in the reform efforts at the Yugoslav level, emphasized the importance of expanding the market as one of the most crucial regulators of economic dynamics, along with increasing production to facilitate integration into the global market. Over the following two years, the professional public began to explore issues such as a more liberal approach to foreign capital and the potential for private initiatives in the service sector. Stane Kavčič, the leading figure of Slovenian liberalism in the 1960s, believed that more freedom should be granted to enterprises, particularly in decisions about income distribution. He argued that future development planning should be guided by business performance and production costs.⁵⁵

Although from the end of 1967, federal politics had been gradually distancing itself from these goals, the liberal faction within the Slovenian Communist Party persisted in trying to bring these reforms to life. Several contentious issues emerged, such as the question of investing private capital into social property, which would allow private individuals to participate in the income generated. Other debates centred around private ownership and the privatization of business activities.⁵⁶ The government of Stane Kavčič (who served as Prime Minister of Slovenia for three consecutive terms from 1967 to 1972) also addressed the issues of increasing development disparities among various Slovenian regions, as the imbalance was becoming apparent. The previous regional policy concentrated industrial development in the so-called Slovenian development axis, which encompassed some of Slovenia's largest cities and industrial centres, most of which had been industrial hubs already before World War II.⁵⁷ The policy up to that point further strengthened these dispar-

54 Prinčič, "Gospodarska reforma iz julija 1965," 217–19.

55 Prinčič, "Vlada Staneta Kavčiča in njena gospodarska politika," 123.

56 Prinčič, "Vlada Staneta Kavčiča in njena gospodarska politika," 132–39.

57 Prinčič, "Vlada Staneta Kavčiča in njena gospodarska politika," 133–34.

ities through its investments, which in turn increased differences between predominantly agricultural regions and the surrounding areas of these economic centres. The Slovenske Gorice region, which includes the town of Juršinci, also exhibited a significant developmental lag. The economic reform slowed down by the end of the 1960s, and although some elements of the market-oriented system remained in place, in 1971, the broader ambition to introduce a market economy was abandoned.

The party 'liberalism' of the sixties in Slovenia also brought about greater political pluralism among and within the political organizations (the Socialist Alliance of the Working People, trade unions, and youth organizations) and a general liberalization of Slovenian society—standards of living were rising, Yugoslavia was opening up to the world, and it became possible to travel and work abroad. "Fashion shows, music festivals in the Western style (*Slovenska popevka*), international fairs, a boom in tourism, open borders with congested border crossings, and the influx of Western products became part of everyday life in Slovenia. By the end of the 1960s, during the peak of Kavčič's popularity, television had more than 255,000 subscribers (compared to 778 ten years earlier). It opened a window to the world for Slovenians, familiarizing them with fashion trends, Western music production, and offering them numerous series of television shows," historian Božo Repe described Slovenian society at the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s.⁵⁸

All this had a significant impact on the attitude toward private agriculture and the efforts of private peasants for modernization and increased competitiveness of the private agricultural sector, as well as for greater political equality, equal treatment with the rest of society concerning social security, and for participation in decision-making within their organizations, namely cooperatives (where they emphasized their right to participate in self-management).

The peasant becomes a political actor

In April 1968, President of the Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia, Sergej Kraigher, met with representatives of private peasants in a debate convened and coordinated by the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Slovenia. The peasants spoke openly about a wide range of problems they faced and proposed solutions. They firmly demanded equal self-management rights and emphasized that they wanted to be an equal part of society. Jože Pratengrazer stated, for example:

"Comrades, as a peasant, I have been most hurt by this: we have always asserted and still assert today that work and only work is the basic measure of a person's value. [...] However, when we talk about working people and

58 Repe, "Slovenski »liberalizem« šestdesetih in vloga Staneta Kavčiča," 112.

communities, I can safely say that peasants were not considered, because we were, so to speak, a kind of, I don't know, a special sect, an inferior class."⁵⁹

Similarly, Jože Kodre expressed his feelings:

"I hope the day is not far when I will truly become an equal member in the full sense of the word, and I will not be ashamed to tell my friends that I am a private peasant. Until now, they have looked at me as a speculator, as a kulak [...] and who knows what else."⁶⁰

The significant and important shift in the attitude of the authorities toward peasants during this time is also reflected in the words of Marjan Jelovšek:

"For the first time in twenty years, I can speak in public institutions as a peasant, without any additional labels, and I must emphasize this. So far, when I presented myself as a peasant, I did so as a kind of enemy of the existing regime, despite the fact that I must recognize that peasants actually bore the brunt of the national liberation war and suffered the worst material losses among all social classes. Today, we must sincerely thank the comrade president of the Assembly for accepting us as peasants."⁶¹

During the extensive debate, the peasants outlined a number of specific issues and proposed potential solutions. One of the most pressing demands was for equal rights in the realm of social security, including health care, pensions, and disability benefits. They emphasized the importance of self-management and the right to participate in decision-making within cooperatives, as well as the possibility of establishing their own. A recurring concern was the absence of a dedicated organization to represent their interests—both in terms of marketing their produce and advocating for their rights. As Štefan Sambt aptly put it:

"The organization does not matter, the form does not matter; what matters is that the peasant has his place, and that this organization is his organization. All peasants agree with this."⁶²

59 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

60 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

61 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

62 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

Access to favourable loans was another key demand, enabling investments in agricultural progress. They also expressed a desire for greater influence in decisions related to forest management. The emergence of social stratification and signs of poverty among peasants were pointed out as troubling developments. Furthermore, the need for mechanization and modernization was underlined, with many noting that agricultural machinery remains significantly less accessible to private peasants, who are often forced to pay much higher prices than the social sector. On this topic, Sambt remarked:

“From experience, I can tell you that those who bought tractors in our area of Pomurje were those who worked in Austria or those who had family members employed in industry. The pure peasant, who only engages in agricultural production, has the hardest time.”⁶³

Lastly, the importance of agricultural extension services and education was emphasized as vital for future development.⁶⁴

The conversation was a consequence of, or a part of, the broader trend of liberalization and economic reform, as evidenced by the speech of Sergej Kraigher, who began with these words:

“I would first like to say that this conversation itself is an expression of the processes accelerated by economic and social reform, particularly in terms of strengthening self-management and addressing our social problems and the issues of our development on this basis. Therefore, I believe it is important to recognize that these meetings and similar gatherings that are now taking place are an integral part of our collective effort to solve the problems inherited and those that are re-emerging in our development based on these self-management principles.”⁶⁵

Kraigher supported peasants' thoughts about their self-management rights within their agricultural organizations, in terms of participation in management, including equal decision-making regarding income distribution. He spoke about “introducing self-management in agriculture” through sections of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Slovenia, which should operate at the municipal level, and collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce, so that peasants' issues are heard more quickly in the assembly and government.

63 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

64 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

65 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

Kraigher also agreed to consider the possibility of subsidizing interest rates for financing private production, while emphasizing the responsibility of municipalities in investing in development and creating local development programs. He acknowledged the need to expand peasants' insurance but also listed several dilemmas about how to regulate it. Among other things, in the context of protecting agriculture from the impacts of imports, which some peasants called for in the discussion, he emphasized that it does not matter whether the economy is private, cooperative, or socially owned agricultural economy if it is "aimed at increasing production, enhancing the productivity of its work, and rationally also its consumption."⁶⁶ He added:

"In my opinion, we would make a big mistake if someone here were to protect every type of production. We must protect the production that is established on such foundations that we can (compete—addition made by J. S.) in the foreign market."⁶⁷

In doing so, he also rejected the demands for guarantees that peasants would be able to sell their produce. He stressed the importance of labour-based distribution and added that peasants must contribute through work, not just through sales contracts. He also challenged the peasants' assessments of the number of cooperatives and combines that operate at a loss. Regarding the "injustices of the past" that peasants complained about, Kraigher admitted that mandatory purchases after the war and the peasants' working cooperatives had been "problematic."⁶⁸

Although the Slovenian Prime Minister Stane Kavčič, who embodied the more liberal faction in Slovenia, was forced to resign in 1972—marking the definitive end of the so-called liberalism of the 1960s in Slovenia—the policy toward private agriculture underwent significant changes during this period. The demands that private peasants were allowed to present for the first time within the Socialist Alliance of Working People were addressed by both the Slovenian government and parliament. Most of them were formalized in the 1972 Law on the Association of Peasants.

Conclusion

After initial successes, the system of cooperation between private peasants and the social sector of agriculture in the 1960s began to show increasing shortcomings. Cooperatives gradually started to resemble enterprises where employees gained a

66 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

67 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

68 AS 537, Republiška konferenca socialistične zveze delovnega ljudstva Slovenije, TE 147, spis 631, Zapisnik Kraigher Sergej.

dominant influence, while peasants were losing their say in the management of cooperatives. The merger of cooperatives into larger agro-combinate complexes, creating vast areas, further alienated cooperatives from their members, making it difficult to maintain close contact with the peasants. Moreover, the cooperation simply did not function as intended. Basic forms of collaboration prevailed, and cooperatives were unable to offer machinery on terms favourable to peasants. Although the private sector still accounted for a significant portion of food production, there was a widespread belief that the social sector would soon meet all food needs. This led to the neglect of the private agricultural sector, widening the productivity gap between the private and social sectors. This situation contributed to a gradual decline in interest in agriculture in rural areas and accelerated the migration of young people from the countryside. Membership in cooperatives decreased dramatically.

The biggest problem was that cooperatives, due to various issues, were unable to provide peasants with support in using agricultural machinery. Peasants were unable to pay enough for tractor services to make them profitable for the cooperatives. Additional problems included a shortage of cooperative-owned tractors and a lack of spare parts for broken machinery. In such conditions, more and more tractors ended up in the hands of private peasants. Some were sold to them by cooperatives facing financial difficulties, while others were purchased abroad by the peasants themselves. As a result, peasants who could not find adequate support for their own modernization in cooperatives began to self-organize. In the second half of the 1960s, they formed several types of communities, particularly machinery-sharing communities, where they jointly managed agricultural equipment. These communities lacked a proper legal foundation, were semi-legal or illegal, and were sometimes registered as associations. In any case, they were ideologically controversial.

At the same time, under the influence of a younger, more liberal faction within the Communist Party in Slovenia, the 1960s saw significant changes in societal and economic views. Yugoslavia was opening up to the world, living standards improved, Western products appeared in stores, and working abroad was permitted. Over time, people internalized the slogans of self-management propagated by the government and began to perceive the functioning of society, as well as the rights they believed they were entitled to, based on these principles. Meanwhile, the economic reform, with its bolder introduction of market principles, exposed the problems and deficiencies in agriculture. It became clear that the state of the social sector (indebtedness) and, even more so, of the private sector—still crucial for food security—was poor. The productivity of the private sector lagged significantly behind that of the social sector. If the market-oriented reform was to be taken seriously, it was evident that the faster modernization of the private agricultural sector was also necessary.

The government's decision to listen to private peasants was also influenced by the growing disparities in development between different regions—an inequality undesirable in a socialist society—and the rapid departure of young people from rural areas and agriculture, which was already beyond the limits of acceptability. A key turning point in this process appears to have been 1968, when private peasants were able to voice their demands within the Socialist Alliance of Working People. Their demands (for a representative organization, for lower-interest loans to accelerate modernization, for an agricultural advisory service, for participation in decision-making in cooperatives, etc.) were heard and met. Most of them found a formal foundation in the 1972 Law on the Association of Peasants. Amid all these significant changes and historical developments, a small group of peasants in Juršinci demonstrated courage and initiative as early as the mid-1960s in their fight for their own grafting community, and even more so with their bold signing of a cooperation agreement. They did so under the pre-war civil code, as full private individuals, thus challenging the authorities. In the second half of the 1960s, the self-organization of private peasants—driven by economic necessity and a growing sense of protest—had developed into a broader movement that increasingly compelled the state to respond. So, while the peasants in Juršinci were not the only ones, they were certainly among the first heralds of this 'spring' in Slovenian private agriculture after World War II.

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