

Farmers of Ukraine were once known for managing the breadbasket of Europe. They are keen to raise production once again after years of stagnation, one of the results of collectivisation. Today people are adjusting to independent farmers owning and renting land, and farm businesses run by farming families with a manager and board of directors. Progress has been made over the past 10 years but there is still much more to be done.

The area of Ukraine where we met has large flat fields of 25-300 hectares of very rich soil surrounded by trees, known, we were told, as 'Stalin's windbreaks'. After all the suffering he brought to the country the windbreaks are one thing Stalin can be thanked for.

To understand Ukraine's agriculture today it is necessary to understand the past 100 years of its history, events that carved up much of Central-Eastern Ukraine into 2,000-5,000 hectare collectives. The creation of these collectives removed many of the landmarks that could remind people what the country was like before communism. Many of the collectives have now been pulled down and the material reused to enlarge people's homes. However the structures from some collectives are still standing and in use. As a result of recent land reform, big fields were divided into 2-10 hectare plots and given to former collective farm members. Many of these plots are now rented by farmers and farming companies. You can meet a farmer who works on 0.5 hectare, and a corporation that manages more than 500,000 hectares.



Farmers' Dialogue delegates met in a large barn, formerly part of the collective, now beautifully decorated with traditional farming and villages scenes painted on the walls. The barn is normally used as a shop selling grain, seeds, animal feed and flour to local people. At the beginning of each meeting and during meals we were entertained by singers in traditional Ukrainian costumes. In spite of sub-zero temperatures we were kept warm by a wood-burning heater.

We had three hosts: Mykhailo Marynychenko, Mykhailyna Skoryk and Petro Matviy. Mykhailo Marynychenko is a director of the farm where we met. He is among the few who have adjusted from being director of a collective farm to becoming manager of what is now a farm business with a board of directors. The farm has more than 2000 hectare of rented land, where they grow wheat, barley, sunflower, corn, some vegetables and keep sows for pork production and beef cattle. His remark as the event ended was, 'I would like to see the next Farmers' Dialogue really international, to see more farmers from different countries of the world come to one place and be able to talk to each other directly. The exchange of experience of farmers from different countries should be the base of future Ukraine Farmers' Dialogues. In such a way we will build up cross-borders friendship and helpful networks for all of us.'



Mykhailo Marynychenko



Mykhailyna Skoryk

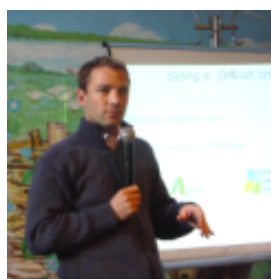
Mykhailyna Skoryk is an agricultural journalist who wants to launch a national agricultural magazine, one of its aims being to build unity between the farmers of Ukraine.

Petro Matviy is an independent farmer and chairman of the Krynychky District Farmers Association; he grows grain on 250 hectares of private land where he lives with his wife, their 5 children and his brother's family. He said 'During the Farmers' Dialogue I discovered how important it is for Ukrainian farmers to communicate with each other and exchange information and experiences, not only on Ukraine farming issues but in solving different problems with colleagues from France, Britain, Poland. In such friendly meetings farmers can be active in expressing their opinion on state policy inside and outside of Ukraine. We need to learn how to be better organized and a stronger force to bring change.'



Petro Matviy

We were supported by 2 young ladies, Zoryana Borbulevych and Lena Kashkaryova, who helped with interpreting and assisted with many of the conference arrangements. They work with Foundations for Freedom, a programme of Initiatives of Change. Most of their time is taken up with running courses in personal development and ethical leadership, aimed at helping people develop their leadership skills through encouraging them to search for values-centred decision-making in personal and professional life whilst creating positive change in their communities and countries. Some at the Dialogue enrolled for their course.



Thomas Hazouard

Debates, sometime heated, took place as delegates discussed marketing, cooperation, the need for finance and a general feeling of lack of support from government. As a means of bringing new ideas to the situation Thomas Hazouard from France, with 2 French friends farming in Ukraine, gave examples of how French farmers cooperate to share machinery, gain credit from financial institutions and to market their products. Polish farmer Mechislav Shroda explained how land markets work in his country and the changes that took place in farming after they joined

to European Union.

Legally it is forbidden to buy or sell arable land in Ukraine, and this has resulted in a growth in sales on the black market. Most of Ukraine's independent farmers who own small and medium-sized farming companies are afraid to buy and sell land. They feel too weak to compete with big agricultural corporations, which have grown rapidly over the last 3 years.

During farm visits we saw imaginative projects using some of the collective buildings for mushroom growing, a malting enterprise, pig production. We also had a tour around Lada Ltd, the company that runs the farm on which we were meeting. We were shown crops of winter wheat and barley and a field where non-ploughing technologies are being tested.



mushroom growing



The 60 farmers from Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhya, Poltava and Cherkassy regions who came to the event came to the conclusion that there is a lack of communication among themselves: they have a lot of common problems and need to be better organized to share their ideas so they can develop their farming.

Mykola Shaposhnyk, the head of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast Farmers Association, expressed great interest in the location of future Dialogues within and outside Ukraine and wants to maintain links between all the participants.



Mykola Shaposhnyk