

Georgia: The Last Collective Farm

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Land reform may be the last straw for Georgia's Dukhobor community.

It is only six in the morning, but there is already a commotion outside the house of tractor driver Oleg. Amid angry shouts and obscenities, local residents are vying to be the first to get his three-strong crew and old machinery to mow the hay on their plots.

"They are all flocking in and all of them want to have their hay mown immediately," grumbles Oleg. "We are working at night too, but we still have no time to please everyone."

This harvest-time rush is something new for the Russian village of Gorelovka in Georgia's southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region, near the border with Armenia.

It is a result of the land reform, which started in Georgia in 1992, but reached Gorelovka only this summer. Previously, the farm organized all the mowing -- now farmers have to arrange everything themselves and good tractor drivers have more work than they can cope with.

Only after the haymaking had begun did villagers find out they were entitled to land of their own. However, the news upset many villagers, who don't want to see their collective farm -- the only one in Georgia left over from Soviet times -- broken up.

Gorelovka is home to a community of Dukhobors, ethnic Russians practicing a rare form of Orthodox Christianity, who were exiled from Russia to the Caucasus in the middle of the 19th century for their pacifist views and doctrinal beliefs.

Fifteen years ago Dukhobors lived in eight villages in this region, but today their community, once nearly 7,000 strong, has shrunk to only a few hundred. (See 'Special Report: Last Days of the Georgian Dukhobors, CRS 254, September 3, 2004).

Their Dukhoborets agricultural cooperative, which the Russians still call by its old Communist name, a collective farm, was founded by the Dukhobor community in 1997 to succeed Gorelovka's Lenin collective farm. It remained faithful to traditions of Soviet-style collective farming.

Only Dukhobors could use the lands of the farm, even though ethnic Russians account for only half of Gorelovka's population, with Armenians and Georgians forming the other half. Ethnic Armenians and Georgians, who came to live in the village in the Nineties, when Dukhobors started to leave, were not allowed to work in Dukhoborets but still had to buy hay for their cows from the farm.

As in Communist times, the collective farm provided each Dukhobor family with a small plot of land. The crops were divided up between the family and the cooperative, which was the only employer for the Russians and paid its workforce quite well by Georgian standards at around 150 laris (80 US dollars) a month.

The land distribution commission of the local administration has now started to hand out land around Gorelovka. This summer, they stripped the cooperative of almost 5,000 hectares, which was distributed among all the local Armenians, Russians and Georgians, leaving Dukhoborets with only 600 hectares.

“We gave between six and 15 hectares to each Dukhobor family,” said the head of the local administration Azat Yegoyan. “This is quite a lot for one family.”

The head of the land commission, Askanas Markosian, said no particular criteria had been applied when the plots were being distributed. Precedence was given to local farmers, “as they feed the state and have people working for them.”

Auctions will soon be held to sell off the rest of the land.

Most local officials see the collective farm as an unwanted remnant of Soviet times, which leaders of the Dukhobor community were exploiting skilfully to avoid sharing lands with migrant Armenians and Georgians.

But the Dukhobors have been reluctant to give up their common farm and few of them understand what it will mean to have private property.

Dukhobors say the farm is far more than an agricultural enterprise, but something that preserves their communal traditions.

“Since time immemorial Dukhobors have been living as a commune,” explained Lyubov Demina. “People here don’t want to readjust to a new way of life. All the other collective farms in the area were abolished, but we reorganised ours. We did this because we thought that we would live as long as our communal way of life did.”

Like all other Dukhobor families in Gorelovka, Olga Medvedeva’s family still lives in a small peasant’s hut that resembles a Russian 19th-century home. Whitewashed on the outside, the walls of the house are made of dung bricks. The light coming in through small windows rests on patterned embroideries, tapestries and a Russian stove that smells of smouldering coals.

Having washed her hands in the wash-stand, Olga cuts newly-baked bread and puts the generous slices on an old wooden table.

She said she worked milking cows in Gorelovka’s collective farm for 20 years. This year her family was given 10 hectares of land, around the same amount as they had from the collective farm.

“A lot of people used to work on the collective farm, and if a family had a milkmaid and tractor driver, it was a well-off,” she said with sadness in her voice.

Tatyana Chuchmayeva, head of the Dukhobor community, said that 470 local Dukhobors had sent applications to the Russian government to move to Russia. They are being promised free transport, housing and benefits for six months.

“Gorelovka’s Dukhobors are now waiting for the beginning of next year, when the State Duma will start considering resettlement projects from provinces, and then they will know exactly where they will be

moved,” said Chuchmayeva.

Olga Medvedeva’s family is among the applicants for participation in the program.

“If everyone goes, I won’t stay here either,” she said. “But it will be a pity, because I’ve spent my whole life here.”

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