The impact of bureaucracies on peasant autonomy

A case study from the region Mühlviertel, Austria

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Abstract

The current food system is characterized by long value chains, commodification, and environmental degradation. Simultaneously the European Common Agricultural Policy favours this system, benefiting industrial agriculture. This setup creates complex bureaucracies that bind rural areas to urban centers, limiting peasants' agency. This raises the interest in alternatives, where a focus on autonomy is highly relevant, as it shows how peasants navigate their foperation within capitalism and the state. Thus, this exploratory case study revolves around the impact of bureaucracies on peasant autonomy. A qualitative methodology was employed, incorporating in-depth interviews and observations with seven peasants, two of whom were also part of a group interview. The study's analysis critically builds on the concept of autonomy by van der Ploeg (2018). First, the research presents different meanings of autonomy, including farm-level autonomy and forms of collective autonomy, in a regionally situated context in Mühlviertel, Austria, also identifying contradictions to the literature. Second, it identifies relevant bureaucracies for peasants under study. Lastly, it examines how these bureaucracies impact their autonomy. The study concludes that bureaucracies have a significant impact on peasant autonomy. They were found to limit the development of resource base and constrain autonomy from the market. This is relevant as it shows how bureaucracies can contribute to alternative pathways to the current food system, making it an important lever for the needed food system transformation. Thus, this study has policy implications, but also contributes to the current debate on autonomy within peasant studies.

Keywords: peasants, autonomy, agroecology, bureaucracy

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Abbreviations

LVC	La Via Campesina
AMA	Agrarmarkt Austria
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
ÖPUL	Austrian programme for the promotion of environmentally friendly, extensive agriculture that protects the natural habitat

Introduction

The current food system is characterized by long value chains, commodification, environmental degradation, high proportions of food being wasted and unfair conditions for poor and rich farmers (Clapp 2016), especially revealing its weakness in times of crisis (Vergara-Camus & Jansen 2022). The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) fails again to "address the loss of small- and medium-sized farmers, the low prices of their production, low incomes, and the concentration of production" (ECVC 2021). Large farm holders and agro-industry will still be benefiting disproportionally from CAP payments in the next period. Thus, the neo-liberal agenda and the current food system are continued to be favoured by European policies for the years to come. This raises the interest in alternatives to neoliberalism, where a focus on autonomy is highly relevant, as "it is often used to express the ability of individuals or collective subjects to escape in one way or another the rule of capital or the control of the state" (Vergara-Camus and Jansen 2022, p. 456). However, diverging uses of the notion autonomy exist within current agrarian studies literature (Vergara-Camus & Jansen 2022), along with well-articulated critique (Jansen et al. 2022). Simultaneously peasant movements, such as La Via Campesina propose the notion of autonomy as a key aspect for agroecology, which focuses on 'local autonomy, local markets and community action […]" (Rosset & Altieri 2017, p. 52). Agroecology is seen as contradicting the current food system and as possible pathway to food system transformation, for it to become more environmentally friendly and socially just (Rosset & Altieri 2017). For van der Ploeg (2010, see Rosset & Altieri 2017) agroecology is used by peasants as a strategy to enlarge their autonomy from input and credit markets. Thus, agroecology is used to reduce dependency relations. This transition to agroecology moves them on the continuum to be more peasant like (Ibid.). Besides others, national agricultural policies are named as one on the main barriers to scaling up agroecology (Rosset & Altieri 2017). Marsden (1993) more generally regards to bureaucracies within state institutions as means to tie the periphery to the centre, where chances to further local specificity is subsequently reduced. This resonates with van der Ploeg (2018) for whom food empires and rural development policies, the latter organized as mega projects, have crucial impact upon rural subject. Rural development policies in Europe impose high degrees of formalization, often running "counter to the many of the autonomous initiatives stemming from the countryside" (Bock 1998, see van der Ploeg 2018, p. 120). He

argues that the central management of such programs is in contrary to "the heterogeneity of the social and natural world" (van der Ploeg 2018, p. 120). Moreover, he sees another dimension, bureaucratic 'red tape', which results by the state favouring to deal with big organizations, rather than farmers. Autonomy for van der Ploeg (2018) occurs where rural development is an endogenous process and farmers are the main partners of the state, on the other side would then be large non-agrarian organizations and state control. Jansen et al. (2022, p. 943) criticize this view, as it portrays a "state-large business pact that pushes smallholders to the wall".

Deriving from these insights it could be relevant to investigate the role of bureaucracies for peasant autonomy, revealing whether bureaucracies are generally hindering or also enabling autonomy. This is relevant as autonomy plays an important role in agroecology, the latter is seen as a potential driver for the urgently needed food system transformation.

The Austrian strand of LVC has in recently published a brochure for their agenda on agroecology (Forster 2023). Here the use of autonomy relates very closely to Petersen et al. (2022), van der Ploeg's (2018) and van der Ploeg and Schneider's (2022) conceptualization. Autonomy is portrayed on farm level, market level and more general as resistance and strategy of social movements. Like van der Ploeg (2018) they also emphasize that cooperation and solidarity reinforce autonomy, and hence agroecology. Based on the observation that their understanding of autonomy is not grounded in a national context, I propose to examine how autonomy is really experienced by peasants on the ground. This is necessary as autonomy is not only understood in different ways but is also a contested concept needing further research and theorization (Vergara-Camus & Jansen 2022). Van der Ploeg's (2018) concept in particular has received extended critique by Jansen et al. (2022), which calls for further empirical data to test his theory considering these critiques. Situating the findings within this discussion will not only advance the current debate on autonomy, but also serve as the base to identify how bureaucracies are hindering and/or enabling peasant autonomy in a regionally situated context in Mühlviertel, Austria.

This research will first, contribute to the current debate on peasant autonomy by intervening in the discussion by van der Ploeg (2018) and Jansen et al. (2022). But it will also provide insights into the role of bureaucracies in peasant autonomy. This is relevant, as autonomy is an important constituent of agroecology, which is seen as alternative the current food system and thus is in urge to be scaled up. The findings could be relevant for policy making but also for LVC Austria and agroecology research.

1.1 Aim, objectives and research questions

The aim of this case study is to explore the meaning of autonomy in peasant farming in a regionally situated context and provide insights on how bureaucracies impact, thus hinder or enable, this autonomy.

The research's objectives are:

To explore the meaning of autonomy for the peasantry in this case. I will try to identify what autonomies are experienced on the ground, looking for meanings of autonomy regarding the state, the market, and the farm level, as well as the level of cooperation between farms. Moreover I will identify how bureaucracy hinders or enables peasant autonomy.

Thus, the research questions are:

How do the peasants in the study area understand and construct autonomy?
How do bureaucracies hinder or enable peasant autonomy?

1.2 Outline of the thesis

I started this thesis with the Introduction and then continued to present the aim, objectives, and research questions (1). In the background section a literature review that aims at identifying different autonomies, but also structures can be found, then continuing with an introduction into the case, followed by the context that provides general information about the region under study (2). Next the conceptual framework will be explained, these are autonomy and bureaucracy (3). Followed by the methodology, showing in detail how the study has been conducted (4). Then the findings are presented (5) and discussed (6). Concluding with a summary and suggestions for future research (7).

Background

2.1 Different notions of autonomy

Research on autonomy in agrarian studies mostly focus on Latin America (Schneider & Niederle 2010; Vergara-Camus 2014; Henderson 2019; Guimarães & Wanderley 2022; Ploeg & Schneider 2022; Sankey 2022; Serrano 2023; Villalba-Eguiluz et al. 2023), with little focus on the global north (Stock & Forney 2014; van der Ploeg 2018b; Strube 2019). Different definitions of autonomy are present in these papers.

The ones focusing on the global north mentioned here make use of van der Ploeg's and colleagues' concept via the peasant condition. But also Villalba-Eguiluz et al. (2023) make use of this concept in their case study in Ecuador, however supplemented with a social and solidarity economy (SSE) and intersectional approach. Besides providing insights into autonomy at the 5 levels (farm, cooperation among farms, market, territorial, political) as proposed by Ploeg and Schneider (2022), this study has shown that autonomy is achieved differently within the household, and along age and gender lines. Where autonomy was found at the farm and cooperation level, structural constraints were identified that hinder autonomy on a territorial and political level. These factors, besides others, where social differentiation, lack of policies, economic limitations, but also the fact that women were rejected by the labour market and thus started to engage in agroecology. They conclude that these are the challenges in the upscaling of agroecology as a strategy for territorial development (Villalba-Eguiluz et al. 2023). Strube (2019) made the case for six farms in the United States, where he identified qualitative, but also quantitative repeasantization. Farmers are struggling for their autonomy and produce for their subsistence, however due to external factors, such as servicing debt, access to commodified land, taxes, and other means of production, they also engage in commodity production. Hence, he argues, that these farmers embody both, peasant principles, but also capitalist ones. He adapts van der Ploeg's and Scott's idea that peasants are counter-hegemonic, even if they are not collectively organised, thus making use of intrinsic autonomy (Ibid.)

Turning now away from the use of van der Ploeg an colleagues concept of autonomy, Guimarães and Wanderley (2022) understand autonomy as a polysemic

concept, thus the meaning of autonomy can only be conceptualized by collectives that are engaged in these autonomous projects. They have identified the meaning of autonomy for two organizations, an indigenous and a peasant one, regarding autonomy from the state and from the market in Bolivia. Albeit that both organizations wanting different autonomies, they found that autonomy does not only occur from, but within the state and the market, meaning that the organizations claim for example political participation, but also to engage with the market on their demand. Also Serrano (2023), besides a very broad definition of autonomy, makes her case around autonomy within the market, but through agroecology. She highlights the agency of these small-scale palm oil farmers within the global market, however also emphasizing how important state led agrarian reforms and support from organizations are to make possible carving out spaces of autonomy.

All these scholars have looked at individuals or collectives that on different levels try to escape capital and/or the state. However important findings are, that struggles for autonomy can occur also within the market or the state, for example in demands for political participation of organizations or to participate in the market on their own terms. The achievement of autonomy is also different among the household, especially among gender and age lines. The biggest difference between the levels of autonomy occurs at the farm level, where compared to the other levels, techno-organizational aspects are measured. Many of these scholars also highlighted how autonomy is hindered or enabled by context. The concept of autonomy is used on many different levels, scholars following van der Ploeg, and colleagues concept try to identify autonomy at the farm (individual autonomy), but also on a cooperation between farms level and in the creation of nested markets, whereas scholars looking solely on collective forms of autonomy look closely at autonomy from or within the state and the market. Both sharing principal ideas of territorial and political autonomy. To conclude, autonomy is used in many ways, looking at different aspects and levels, which makes the concept complicated to grasp and define. The following table and list provide some structure to understand the different notions of autonomy prevailing in the chosen literature. These findings are relevant for my inquiry, as they directed what I looked out for while conducting fieldwork, but also throughout the analysis.

Table 1: Autonomy at different levels summarized from the literature

farm level	**cooperation between farms**	**market level**	**territorial level**	**political level**
low degrees of commoditization	mutual help	nested markets		
self-controlled resource base		within the market		within the state
		from the market		from the state

2.2 Critique of van der Ploeg's concept of autonomy

The concept of autonomy does not only appear in different notions but also faces heavy critiques, which raised my interest in exploring the tensions within the concept. This critique was the trigger for this research to be conducted, as it changed my view of the concept by van der Ploeg (2018) immediately. Resulting in insecurity but also curiousness on how these opposing ideas play out on the ground.

The focus in van der Ploeg's (2018) conceptualisation, as Jansen et al. (2022) point out is on a techno-organizational level, that means focused on practices that reduce the dependence on unfavourable markets and enhancement of soil fertility (Ibid.).

Jansen et al. (2022) have identified some key problems with van der Ploeg's (2018) conceptualization, which I will elaborate on the above-mentioned characteristics. First, they argue that the struggle for autonomy in the construction of a self-controlled resource base is mainly concerned with an intrinsic meaning of autonomy. Quoting van der Ploeg (2018, p. 41) "[t]his resource base is the key to achieving autonomy" and the struggle for autonomy is a "central and universal feature of the peasantry", they argue that it is built upon an individualized notion of agency. Hence, neglecting that the potential options for farming are shaped by structure and that peasants actually engage in myriad sets of interdependencies in cultural, political and economic arenas. This makes interdependencies a key element "of what makes a farmer/peasant" (Jansen et al., 2022, p. 496). Second, the use of 'degree of commodification' has two problems, one is that a low degree of commodification can also occur in capitalist farms, posing analytical problems when it is used as criterion in assessing the degree of peasantness or an agroecological systems. Furthermore, exploiting non-commodity circuits is not unknown "to capitalist generalized commodity production" (p. 497). This opposes van der Ploeg and Schneider's (2022) position that peasant agriculture is operating in a non-capitalist segment of the economy and 'relatively autonomous (i.e. independent) from wider capitalist dynamics' (Jansen et al., 2022, p. 498). This again dismisses how peasants are conditioned by the context around them (Ibid.). Lastly, enlargement of autonomy to work under one's own conditions and expectations provides a rather normative view of autonomy, meaning autonomy is good, therefore dependency is bad (Ibid.) This results from the view that "dependency relations can be said to be located within the dominant social formation" (van der Ploeg, 2018, p.38). Therefore, Jansen et al. (2022) propose to shift the focus from autonomy to dependencies, as these can be shown after normative and political evaluation and it allows to provide insights in the interaction

„between the structuring forces of capitalism and household livelihood strategies, gender, ecology, and so on" (p. 502).

To conclude, van der Ploeg (2018) is emphasising the strong agency of the peasantry, while Jansen et al. (2022) put weight on the forcefulness of structure. Were autonomy leaves more room to have greater agency, dependency relationships would be of a deterministic kind. This discussion ultimately shapes this thesis by directing its focus towards understanding the interplay between peasant autonomy and structural dependencies.

2.3 The case

This case study seeks to explore the meaning of autonomy for peasants in the region Mühlviertel and the impacts of bureaucracies on such. To outline the case, I will present the farms under study. I chose characteristics that show that these farms fit under the umbrella term agroecology but also ones that give great insight into how farming is organized. These were farm activities, marketing strategy, range of products and the mode of farming (see table 4) Farm activities are the various operational sectors within a farm that include economic activities as well as non-economic ones. I will now present more information for each farm separately.

Farm 1 is the smallest farm under study, with the size of five hectares. It is a cooperation between two women focusing on ready meals in glass jars. They will be called Julia and Maria in this research. While one woman focuses on growing the vegetables, the other one focuses on processing them into ready meals. They sell through the farmers market as their farm location is quite isolated. They have taken up farming not many years ago but together successfully developed the farm.

Farm 2 is a family farm and operates a 31 hectares farm with a focus on oilseeds. I interviewed the manager of the operation, which I will call Susanna in this research. Approximately ten years ago, they took over the farm. The previous generation already operated the farm ecologically, where Susanne's father-in-law was portrayed as an organic pioneer. For labour related and ethical reasons they developed the farm to operate without animals successfully. They sell through a self-service hut at their farm as they are located close to a small city.

Farm 3 is a family farm and is the biggest farm under study, with 43 hectares. I interviewed one of the main operators of the farm which will be called Lucia. It is the farm with the greatest diversity of farm activities with a focus on seed production. They sell in person from their farm shop, as they are located close to a main road in the region. They have got the farm through extrafamilial farm succession from a single man and carry on his focus on seeds, while also extending it steadily according to their interests.

Farm 4 is a small family farm operating ten hectares of land. I interviewed Hannes, who is one of the main operators of the farm. While he focuses on arable

farming and baking bread, his wife is growing the vegetables. They have lived in a farm collective in France for many years before returning to take over her parents' farm. They have a great emphasis on nutrient circulation, this is also the main reason for them to keep animals. They sell through the farmers market as their farm is relatively isolated.

Farm 5 is family farm operating 42 hectares of land including forest. The husband is mainly responsible for the dairy cows and the forest while his wife supports him and has her own focus on vegetable growing, (milk) processing and direct marketing. She married into the family farm and is an educated journalist, also active for LVC Austria. That is also who I interviewed for this thesis, she will be called Lea. They sell mainly to the diary and partly through a on farm self-service hut, the latter because the farm is situated within a village.

Farm 6 is operated by a couple who took over the farm though extrafamilial farm succession only 2 years ago and measures 26,8 hectares in size. The previous generation still lives on the farm, supporting the young, who both do not come from a farm. They built a new stable in 2022 as there was no possibility to adapt the old one. They shifted from cows to goats and produce milk and meet. The milk is sold to the diary, while there is no strategy for selling the meat yet (as there is not much to sell). However, the plan is to process and direct market the meat in the future.

Farm 7 is a family farm operating 20 hectares. While the young generation has officially taken over the farm some years ago, the old generation still pursues their own farm activities, which are the cows and pigs for meat, and the pasta from grains. While the younger ones developed their own farm branch according to their interests, that is growing and processing soy and lupines into tofu and tempeh. Besides being able to easily sell their produce they continue with all sorts of experiments. I interviewed the young couple, called Theresa and Thomas, but also Clara who is Thomas's mother. They sell through a self-service hut as their farm is located along a main road in the region.

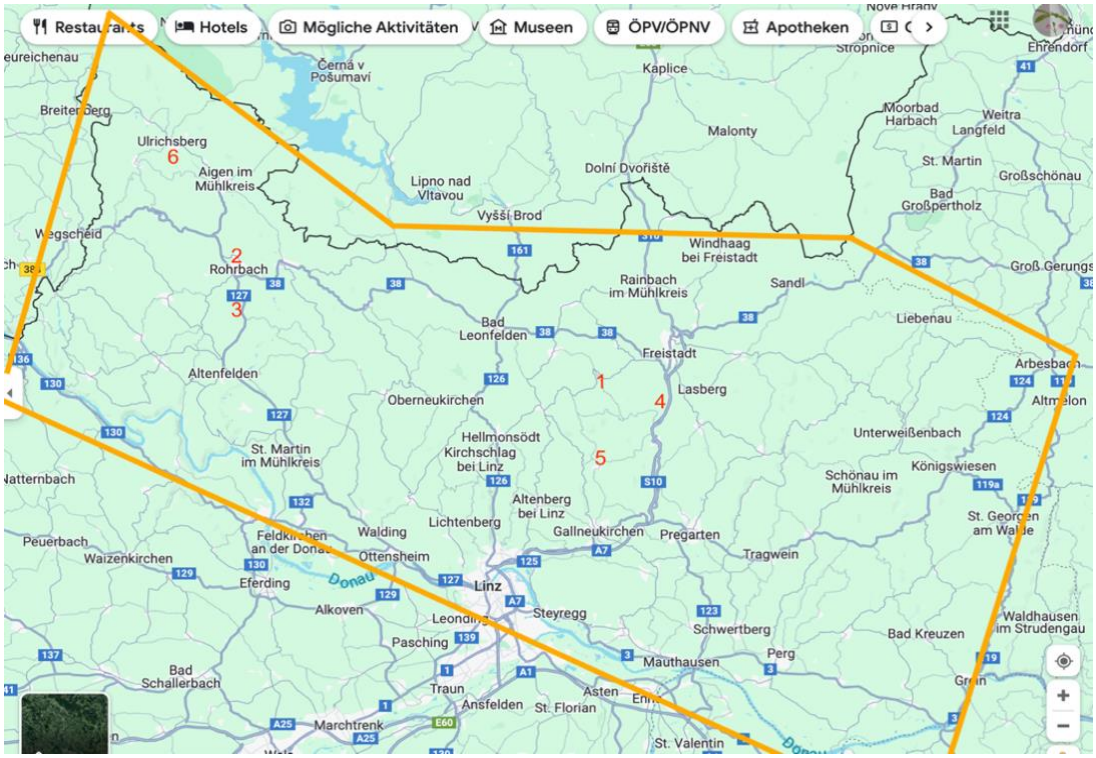
They are members of LVC Austria, while most of them are actively engaged by participating in meetings, workshops, farm visits, demonstrations and more. This means they have a general awareness of current problems within the food system, and political and economic forces that shape it and are collectively organising to oppose it. Further, LVC Austria and participants both use the term 'Bauer', which carries political connotations and is synonymous with 'peasant'. While the use of the term peasant for such farmers is seen critically by some scholars, as the concept denies agrarian classes (Bernstein 2006; Jansen et al. 2022), van der Ploeg (2018) embraces the concept in his book the New Peasantries, showing various cases similar to the ones in this research. At the same time LVC international defines peasants as "people who till the land to produce food, the fishers, the pastoralists, the farmworkers, the landless, the migrant workers, the indigenous people and rural workers - of diverse identities, gender and age groups" (LVC (n.d.). While participants fit into the broad definition of LVC, they at the same time fit into the

concept of the ‘peasant condition’ by van der Ploeg (2018) showing features such as low degrees of commodification, self-provisioning and co-production with nature. Therefore, in recognition of their identity, membership in the broad community of LVC, and their farming practices, the participants of this study will be referred to as peasants.

Table 2: characteristic of farms under study

	farm 1	**farm 2**	**farm 3**	**farm 4**	**farm 5**	**farm 6**	**Farm 7**
size ha	5	31	43	10	42	26,8	20
mode	organic	organic (regenerative)	bio-dynamic	organic	organic	organic	organic
income	farming	farming + part time job (m)	farming	farming	farming	farming + part time job (f)	farming + part time job (m+f)
branches	vegetables sheep chicken ducks fruits farm kitchen	arable farming (grains, oilseeds)	arable farming cows (meat) goats (breeding) chicken bee colonies agritourism	arable farming vegetables bread baking cows (meat)	dairy cows cows (meat) forest	dairy goats offspring (meat) fodder production chicken potatoes agritourism	legumes grains cows (meat) juice press
marketing	farmers market food coop	farm shop urban bakeries (Linz)	farm shop food coop regional shops	farmers market	dairy self-service hut food coops direct customer contact forest owners' association	dairy neighbours’ relatives guests no strategy for meat	self-service hut
products	ready meals in glass fresh vegetables preserves juices mutton	linseed oil hempoil oilseeds honey brandies pasta cereal products	spelt, naked oats, rye, einkorn brandies liqueurs herbals tees honey apple juice beetroot juice pasta potatoes cow meat seeds	bread grains fresh vegetables fruit spread	milk to dairy and direct sales (12%) dairy products (yoghurt, curd cheese, cream cheese) meat wood sirup jam	milk goat meat eggs potatoes fruits (the latter three to neighbours and friends)	pasta meat tea tempeh tofu apples juice lupines soyabeans walnuts

Figure 1: locality of farms under study
political districts: (6,2,3) Rohrbach; (4,1) Freistadt; (5) Uhrfar-Umgebung



2.4 Context and study area

Table 3: overview of agricultural production in the federal state Upper Austria and the region Mühlviertel (Grüner Bericht OÖ 2023)

Upper Austria (INVEKOS)	
# farms	22.262
farm size	
< 5 ha	4.092
5 bis < 10 ha	3.067
10 bis < 20 ha	5.531
20 bis < 50 ha	7.736
50 bis < 100 ha	1.671
> 100 ha	165
labour in agriculture	
total people (paid and unpaid)	78.849
family labour (paid and unpaid) %	88
nonfamily labour %	12
thereof seasonal workers %	6
direct payments (CAP) Mio. EUR	145,6
ÖPUL (CAP) Mio. EUR	72,4 (to 17.900 farms)
full time farms %	43
outside capital EUR	79.595
ecological production	4617
ecological production %	20
ecological production Mühlviertel	2204
engage in direct marketing	2.351
rent rooms (tourism)	572
# farms	420
3-year average income EUR (2020-2022)	39.292
3-year average income EUR (2020-2022) in Mühlviertel	34.391

[1]Austrian Agri-environmental Program

The research area is located in the predominantly rural (NUTS II) area Mühlviertel in Upper Austria (Eurostat 2019 see Novikova et al. 2020). On the contrary to most predominantly rural areas in Europe Mühlviertel is experiencing population increase, this can be attributed to the successful rural development through Local Action Groups and Local Development Associations in the region, fostering "youth engagement, female entrepreneurship alongside economic development and agriculture (with a strong focus on ecological farming)" (Novikova et al. 2020, p. 47).

The region can be characterized by small farm structures and a high proportion of farms in the disadvantaged area. That primarily explains that the 3-year average income of farmers is EUR 4.900 below national level. In Upper Austria 29.200 farms cultivate a total area of 1.05 million hectares. This includes 503.000 hectares of agricultural land and 450.000 hectares of forest. Around 22.500 farms are so-called INVEKOS farms and participate in management measures under the CAP. The average agricultural area per INVEKO farm is around 22 hectares. Almost 20 % of Upper Austrian farms are managed organically, and half of the organic production takes place in the region under study. Compared to the rest of Austria (36%), Upper Austria has a higher proportion of full-time farms (43%). About half of all farms in Upper Austria rent land (15.1 ha on average). A long-term comparison shows a continuous

increase in farm size. However, in international comparison, agriculture in Upper Austria and Austria can still be described as small-scale. The highest proportions of pig (39%) and cattle (29%) are located in Upper Austria, producing a third of all milk (Grüner Bericht OÖ 2023).

Conceptual framework

3.1 Autonomy

As has been demonstrated above, peasant autonomy is a concept with many different notions. For the analysis I will mainly engage with van der Ploeg's (2018) concept, who describes very detailed the struggle for autonomy for the peasantry. I will do so in a critical manner by considering the critiques of his concept. Autonomy for him, takes place first, in the construction of the self-controlled resource base, this can be done on an individual level, but also through collective action, as for example building a seed exchange network, second, in co-production with nature, that includes not only agriculture, but also for example processing and refinement, and lastly, by setting new relations with the market, that allow for autonomy, which occurs at the input, the conversion and the output side. He further argues that the peasantry is constantly striving for autonomy in two ways, to be free from exploitation and free to farm according to personal interests and prospects. To be free from exploitation for him means to be free from dependencies. This becomes evident is his concept of low degrees of commodification. Another important concept in this regard is self-provisioning, that means to reuse what is produced on the farm, such as hay for fodder or milk for cheese making. To farm according to personal interests and prospects relates to the self-controlled resource base and means also to be free to structure one's own workday. Further, he emphasises that pluriactivity, which means to pursue also other professions than farming, does not need to be a sign of deprivation and the disappearance of the peasantry, but that the income obtained through such feeds back into developing farming activities. Related to that is multifunctionality which is the opposite of specialization, meaning that the farm is diverse, including newly emerging farm activities such as agrotourism. Lastly, cooperation between peasants is conceived as "constructing autonomy at higher levels of aggregation" (Ibid., p. 40).

In their recent paper van der Ploeg & Schneider (2022) have further developed the concept, identifying five interrelated levels where autonomy can occur. Relevant for this study are the farm level, the level of cooperation and the level of the market. The level of cooperation is about the mutual help of farmers and reveals itself in practices such as machinery sharing or peasant managed irrigation systems.

At the level of markets, where they specifically emphasise food markets, they mean the establishment of markets and circuits which strengthens individual and political autonomy. Within their concept autonomy occurs through individual or collective agency and must always occur in relation to something. For them, autonomy "is a set of practices through which resources are created that allow people to follow paths that deviate from those prescribed by capital" (Ibid. p. 4). They argue that the practices that create autonomy, can be found in peasant agriculture, which they view as a non-capitalist segment of society (Ibid.). These practices align with the ones put forth by van der Ploeg (2018) mentioned above.

Agroecology

While agroecology is not used analytically as a concept in this thesis, it is the umbrella under which autonomy is researched, making further elaboration necessary. It derives from the understanding that agroecosystems are socio-ecological systems. Besides basing itself on certain agricultural practice principles, like recycling of biomass, enhancement of soil fertility, functional biodiversity, crop species diversity and more, it also highlights local knowledge, is in opposition to the current food system and has as its agenda "creating nature friendly and socially just [food] production systems" (Rosset & Altieri 2017, p. 48). Agroecology is however not limited to the farm-system per se, but has been scaled up to "the integrative study of the ecology of the entire food system, encompassing ecological, economic and social dimensions" (Francis et al. 2003: 100, see Petersen et al. 2022, p. 5). For van der Ploeg (2010, see Rosset & Altieri 2017) agroecology is used by peasants as a strategy to enlarge autonomy from input and credit markets. Thus, agroecology is used to reduce dependency relations. This transition to agroecology moves them on the continuum to be more peasant like (Ibid.). Besides others, national agricultural policies are named as one on the main barriers to scaling up agroecology (Rosset & Altieri 2017).

Lume Method

While the method was not applied in this thesis, it laid the groundwork for analysing autonomy at the farm-level with van der Ploeg's (2018) concept, thus need further elaboration. Lume method at large was introduced to assess the performance of agroecological systems from a socio-economic perspective. One focus of its analysis lies in the autonomy of farmers (Petersen et al. 2022). The concept of autonomy used in Lume adapts van der Ploeg's (1990, cited in Petersen et al., 2022) idea of first, the 'degree of commoditization' that translates to 'autonomy from …' and second, to the 'self-controlled resource base' that translates to 'autonomy to …'. The former meaning the relative autonomy from external relations, such as markets, banks, etc., and the latter referring to the 'room for manoeuvre', meaning the ability to "[implement] reproduction strategies consistent with their economic

perspectives and life projects" (Ibid., p. 50). On the bases of this observation, I used the criteria proposed for autonomy analysis in Lume as entry point for establishing a clear focus of the research and guiding the analytical work.

3.2 Bureaucracy

This thesis understanding of bureaucracy derives from several sources. First, a mainly negative connotated use of bureaucracy was provided by participants. The word was used regarding institutions for regulations, obligations, inspections, their opaqueness, inefficiency, and the paperwork that is entailed in these. Throughout the group interview the main categories, showing the impacts of these bureaucracies within institutions where established. Thus, I did not subordinate their categorisation into a concept of bureaucracy but acknowledge the way they used it.

At the same time Marsden (1993, p. 121) adds to this studies use of bureaucracies, who sees "bureaucratic rules and standardized procedures [as tying] local sites to the centres." Within these networks this results in reduced means of representation, that further limits local specificity. However, he perceives power to also be dispersed within both economic and bureaucratic spheres. This results in a connection between the local and the centre from both sides, making possible for local actors to construct space and claim representation (Ibid.).

Further van der Ploeg (2018) contributes to the understanding of bureaucracies related to rural development policies in Europe. For him rural development policies organized as mega projects, have crucial, predominantly negative impact upon the peasantry. Rural development policies in Europe impose high degrees of formalization, often running "counter to the many of the autonomous initiatives stemming from the countryside" (Bock 1998, see van der Ploeg 2018, p. 120). At the same time the central management of such programs is in contrary to "the heterogeneity of the social and natural world" (van der Ploeg 2018, p. 120). Moreover, he sees another dimension, bureaucratic 'red tape', which results by the state favoring to deal with big organizations, rather than farmers. While he does not give a definition of 'red tape' bureaucracy, for me it refers to excessive and often unnecessary regulations or procedures that hinder efficiency and progress. The opposite would be a functional bureaucracy in the Weberian sense. Autonomy for van der Ploeg (2018) occurs where rural development is an endogenous process and farmers are the main partners of the state. By this he means that rural development should be organized by close relations between farmers and the state. On the other side would then be large non-agrarian organizations and state control. The latter replaces the many individual and heterogenous farmers with a small number of large organizations.

Methodology

As this research aimed to understand a specific context in which participants act, and where multiple views of participants are relevant, a qualitative research design has been chosen. I argue that an exploratory case study methodology is appropriate, as I did not know the "important variables to examine" (Creswell 2014, p. 50). This is especially the case as autonomy has many notions that need to be considered when researching a regionally situated meaning of autonomy. I looked at a case with clear established boundaries (Creswell & Poth 2018), these are a specific place, Mühlviertel, and time, February 2023.

4.1.1 Why Mühlviertel?

The research area has been chosen for two reasons. First, I already had contacts in the area through an excursion organized by LVC Austria in 2022. Second, when I first started to search for information about the region I found interesting facts, such as population influx in the predominantly rural area (Novikova et al. 2020), but also that the region has an amount of 29 % of organically farmed land (LEADERregion Donau-Böhmerwald 2009). Besides these uncommon characteristics, the case is mainly separated through place specificity.

4.2 Methods

An in-depth understanding of a case can only emerge from the use of multiple methods, thus the methods employed in this case study include interviews, observations (Creswell & Poth 2018) and a group interview.

4.2.1 Sample strategy

Since this research strongly builds on van der Ploeg's (2018) concept of autonomy, which is part of his conceptual framework of the peasantry, it was essential to select farms that fit within his framework to scrutinize his theory. This has been done by purposeful sampling. The participants can be characterized as peasants working under the umbrella term of agroecology, that are linked through LVC. Albeit not explicitly naming their farming style as agroecological, they do follow many

principals associated with agroecology, such as recycling of biomass, enhancement of soil fertility, functional biodiversity, crop species diversity and more, but also employ local practices and forms of cultivation, such as the 'Krautland' and the orchard meadows. By further being engaged in LVC Austria, they are clearly in opposition to conventional agronomy and are struggling for "creating nature friendly and socially just [food] production systems" (Rosset & Altieri 2017, p. 48). I have known some of the participants from previous farm visits organized by LVC Austria in 2022. I called the once I remembered and asked if they had interest in participating, but also if they can refer me to other farms in the region. The sole criterions were that they farm organically and are part of LVC Austria. Thus, I employed a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling means that already participating interviewees recommend potential new interview partners for the research, further leading to relevant information (Robson & McCartan 2016). There were no exclusions in other regards. I included every farm that fulfilled my criterions and that wanted to participate, no farm was turned down. This resulted in a wide variety of farms and farm activities of any sort of diversity. The sampling method was oriented on both, the characteristics (farming organic) but also the peasants themselves (being part of LVC). However, there are some characteristics that might be overrepresented in this sample. First, I interviewed seven women, one couple, and only one man. Thus, women are overrepresented in this sample. Second, these peasants are probably the ones that are more outspoken than others, willing to participate in research and other projects. Lastly, the sample overrepresents successful farms, as most of these farms have already served as role models for farm visits or were referred to me as interesting and worth examining.

4.2.2 Interviews

Open ended semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews seem to be a legitimate choice as I looked closely at one particular and small case, while at the same time having some freedom regarding structure and time in an interview, but also capture the key topics for my inquiry (Robson & McCartan 2016). The interviews took place in the homes of the participants in a natural and rather informal setting. I prepared an interview guide with 12 questions and subsequent sub questions, to make sure the information needed will be captured in the interviews. I first shared a document I have prepared that shows how the data will be handled and the rights of the people and asked for a signature. Further the interviews were recorded after asking for allowance. During the interview I tried to keep the questions as open as possible to not influence participants answers and allow the conversation to flow naturally (Ibid.), also allowing for new topics to emerge if interviewees felt they were important. The interviews ranged between 30 minutes to almost 2 hours.

As I aimed at understanding what autonomy is experienced and constructed on the ground, I formed the interview questions by breaking down the concept into its smaller constituents. The different autonomies identified in the background section (2) served as the base to establish the questions. These are on the level of the farm, cooperation, the market, and the political level. Farm level-autonomy resulted in questions regarding farm activities, on-farm processing, marketing strategies but also derived from Lume method for the more techno-organizational aspects. While autonomy through cooperation was based on questions regarding informal and formal cooperation's, other forms of collective autonomy were identified through a question that asked for the main partners of the operation. I tried to ask for political autonomy by asking for their opinions on the CAP and how they envision themselves in it, also testing for specific programs. This question ultimately led to incorporating bureaucracy into this thesis. At the same time, I wanted to understand what influences or conditioned their decision making, revealing how structural factors influence the different farm trajectories. I did so by asking why questions, but also asking for decisive factors for the different variables and by directly asking if something conditioned their decision making (for concrete interview questions see Appendix).

4.2.3 Observations

Observations will provide additional data to my interviews, first, to enhance the validity of the interviews (Robson & McCartan 2016), and secondly, to provide insights into the practical realities of the farms. Depending on weather condition and time the participants and me had differently long walks around the farm. Some of the walks where recorded, the ones where weather condition did not allow or time was very short, I have taken notes. After each farm walk, I also made notes. Criterions from Lume method for autonomy were planned to be used in the interviews. These criterions focus on rather techno-organizational aspects of the farm, thus I spontaneously shifted these questions, where possible, to the farm walk. I did so, as this gave opportunity to directly see what was discussed and have the major points of interest gathered, which also led to more structured observations. Another benefit of that was, that time was taken away from the interviews inside and allocated to the time outside. The observations ranged from 20 minutes to about 1,5 hours.

4.2.4 Group interview

After transcribing and coding the interviews and observations the topic and structure for the workshop two weeks later came forth: bureaucracy. However, the planned and prepared workshop resulted into a group interview of two participants, because two participants cancelled spontaneously shortly before the workshop. This

led to a more informal interview and the making of a poster where the main points were summarized. I allowed for a "substantial degree of flexibility […] with characteristics of a discussion as well as of an interview" (Robson & McCartan 2016, p. 298). The whole process was recorded. The interview lasted about 2 hours.

4.3 Analytical strategy

While still collecting my data, I have already started to transcribe and look for general patterns. I then organized and coded the data with the open source QDA software Taguette, this especially made sense because data derives from different sources, and it made easier the grouping of the information (Robson & McCartan 2016). I created initial codes, some of them emerged from theory like *collective autonomy*, others through the text, like *AMA* (Agrarmarkt Austria) (Creswell's 2014). I then created broader themes where necessary. As an example, *AMA* went into the bigger theme of *bureaucracy*. I then used these themes for further analysis and interpretation (Robson & McCartan 2016) through my chosen conceptual framework.

4.4 Significance and limitations of the study

The significance of this master thesis is the exploration of how rural subjects navigate their autonomy within bureaucratic structures. On the one hand it allows for insights on how institutional regulations impact and mostly constrain peasant autonomy. While on the other hand it shows the struggles and agency of these peasants within bureaucracies in varying faces. This research also adds to the current discussion of peasant autonomy, identifying contradictions to the literature by van der Ploeg (2018). This research could have implications for policy making, as it reveals insights in the (potential) role of bureaucracies in a food system transformation. The thesis contributes to the current academic discussion on autonomy and agroecology in the global north but could be possibly also interesting for LVC Austria.

This study has some major limitations. First, the time constraint of a master thesis limits the quantity and partly the quality of the data gathered. The small sample size is another limitation. However, I see this more as an exploration, looking at small details, that would hardly be possible with more participants. Autonomy captures a great extent of aspects which became only clear during the writing of the thesis. Thus, the scope of this master is quite large compromising the depth of analysis. Nevertheless, I tried to do my best, that also included neglecting so far proposed ideas in the process of writing this thesis.

4.5 Ethics

As ethical considerations occur in all stages of study, I spent some thought about that already in the beginning of conducting the research. I have made sure, that the informants are participating by their free will and without pressure from my side. I did this by first, asking them for participation, second, emphasising that they do not have to if they do not want to participate, and lastly by also telling them that they are free to withdraw anytime. Further, I have informed them on the purpose of the study and if changes occurred, I have told them so. I brought a consent form to the field that has incorporated the above-mentioned information in it, but also states that they are assigned fictious names and how the data is used. While data collection I have kept personal opinions to myself. In the writing of the thesis, I portrayed multiple perspectives and showed contrary findings. I also made sure that participants cannot be identified by the reader (Creswell & Poth 2018). This is especially important, as the plan is to publish an article in the magazine of LVC Austria.

4.6 Reflexivity

As the researcher is the instrument of data collection in qualitative research, being aware of oneself is key. Thus, I will now share the background that shape my philosophical assumptions, my research interest and probably also how I created meaning from the data (Creswell 2014). I am an educated photographer, with a bachelor's degree in agricultural science. I have been an activist and volunteer for almost ten years, ranging from topics such as gentrification, alternative economy, and peasant farming. Further, I have also been an intern within small organisations focusing on peasant agriculture and food sovereignty, such as LVC Austria. It is through these experiences, with individuals, collectives, organisations, authorities, and academia that my worldview has been shaped and strengthened. Choosing a topic that is so close to my heart can make difficult the critical analysis of such. However, the topic I have chosen will not question my overall assumptions about the world, but just give more nuance to it. Thus, I see much more a chance for me, to broaden my view and critically question the strong believes I often have.

More specifically my engagement in LVC Austria in the past asks for special attention while conducting research with LVC members. I have known some of the participants before the study and they are not close to me personally. Thus, we have a rather professional relationship that was kept throughout the fieldwork.

Validation of findings

To validate my findings, I employed several strategies. As studying in a real-world context, I did not expect that the findings always align with my themes and can sometimes be contradictory. I kept my eyes open for such disconfirming evidence,

as they can be very important for the analysis. By conducting a group interview, co-creation of knowledge is stimulated, and validity of the data enhanced. As my data will derive from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations and a group interview, I make use of triangulation to find the evidence that is needed for a valid establishment of a perspective or theme. (Creswell & Poth 2018).

Results

In the following chapter I aim to present my findings. The first chapter attempts to present the findings surrounding autonomy, while the second chapter delves into the impact of bureaucracies on such.

5.1 Meanings of autonomy for peasants in Mühlviertel region

I will first present the findings about farm-level autonomy. I will then follow to show the findings on collective autonomy which incorporates findings on autonomy at the level of the market and cooperation.

5.1.1 Autonomy to – the self-controlled resource base

Van der Ploeg (2018) defines autonomy regarding the self-controlled resource base as to farm after one's own aspirations and economic perspectives. Petersen et al. (2022) put forth criterions to look at *autonomy to* which refers to the self-controlled resource base and includes: *food self-sufficiency, equipment / infrastructure, workforce, soil fertility, water availability, biodiversity and land availability*. These are thus the criterions used to show the findings on farm level autonomy in a uniform way.

*Table 4: findings for **autonomy to** at the farm-level regarding the self-controlled resource base*

	Food self-sufficiency	***Equipment / infrastructure*** *(incl. capital)*	***workforce***	***water availability***	***land availability***	***Biodiversity***	***soil fertility****
Farm 1	[1]	only fixes capital; neighbour provides the equipment / infrastructure regarding making hay	fulltime: 2	well; only water in the foil tunnel; recently to dry[2]	lease land	extensive grassland; big variety of vegetables, also within variety; orchard meadow	
Farm 3	vegetable garden; [1]	capital*;	fulltime: 2	pond*; recently to dry[2]	-	old breeds (cows, goats);	

		equipment / infrastructure on farm	children help when needed			cultivate old genetic varieties of grains; orchard meadow	
Farm 5	vegetable field (cooperative with 10 families), [1]	just paid off their stable (bank loan); just digging a well (bank loan); machine cooperatives	fulltime: 2 children help when needed	just digging a well; pond; recently to dry[2]	constraints regarding farm and fields location in the village	high variety in vegetables; orchard meadow	
Farm 2	vegetable garden; [1]	only fixed capital; investments through direct credits in the past; machine cooperatives	fulltime: 1 parttime: 1 (teacher) his parents help when needed	well; pond; recently to dry[2]	-	orchard meadow; land allocated to nature conservation; green stripes; hedges	
Farm 6	vegetable garden; eggs; potatos;[1]	new stable (bank loan); machine cooperative from village; share the slurry tank with another farmer; borrow machines from neighbour farmer	fulltime: 1 parttime: 1 (organic inspector) former generation helps	wells on their land organized through water cooperative, water is very cheap	-	old breeds (goat, chicken)	
Farm 4	[1]	only fixed capital; machine cooperatives	fulltime: 2 children help when needed	well; pond; second pond is created right now	lease land	extensive farming; old breed (cows); high diversity in vegetables;	
Farm 7	vegetable garden; chicken; two pigs;[1]	only fixed capital; investments through direct credits in the past	parttime: 2 (teacher) parents have their own roles at the farm	well	-	orchard meadows; land allocated to nature conservation; grassland farmed extensively; flower strips;	

[1] use their produce for their own consumption, everything in the list is what they produce extra for food self-sufficiency, see table 1
[2] participants mentioned that in the past it became drier, sometimes requiring them to water where they previously did not have to; no one mentioned constraints regarding water
* none, or not sufficient data available

To produce food for one's own consumption was relevant for all participants, while some see it as cultural heritage, others value the quality, that they are independent, or that it has been growing locally. Two farms have emphasised that they generally grow what they like to eat (farm 2, 7), thus they aligned their farm activities according to what they like and can produce. Lea from farm 5 sees food self-sufficiency as an important source of her income also claiming acknowledgement as we will see later in chapter 5.3.2. To get a feeling for the food from the farms that is consumed by farm inhabitants I will list the total produce from farm 7 as an example: grains, pasta, meat products, juice, tea, soy, lupines, tempeh, tofu, apples, eggs, vegetables. Thomas from the same farm says: *"Milk is no longer produced*

because no one really drinks milk in our house now." This shows that participants engage actively in food self-sufficiency.

Findings regarding workforce are quite heterogeneously. Some have had a parttime job but have decided that they wanted to be fulltime employed at the farm (farm 1). Others prefer pluriactivity for several reasons, that vary from income security (farm 2), to also get away from the farm sometimes (farm 6). It became clear that participants want to freely choose whether they work outside or not, not if they work outside or not. Another interesting finding occurred at farm 5. Lea was working elsewhere, before becoming engaged full time on the farm. Back then she wanted to accompany her husband to the bank, who needed a credit for a new stable. She wanted to see that the farm can carry itself economically and that her income would not be used to sustain the farm as this was important to her. Further, three participants (farm 7 and 2) mentioned that they consider making holidays and having enough leisure in how they pursue farming and can keep up with their expectations. This does not only count for the younger generations as Clara from farm 7 says: "*A job without holidays is not a job worth having*". However, farm 1 acknowledged that self-exploitation is very common in their surroundings, but they actively try to find ways to make farming economically viable, so that one does not have to live along the poverty line.

Participants actively make sure that there is enough water for their future farming activities. The region is generally not lacking water, having around 700 mm precipitation annually. Participants however reported that it is either too much, or too little, or at the wrong time of the year and that this changed only recently, which they attribute to climate change. Several farms (2, 3, 4, 5) have a pond or a well (1, 2, 6, 7) on their land, where farm 4 is just building another one and farm 5 is currently digging a new well.

When looking at the criterion infrastructure / equipment farms either have their own, are in machine cooperatives (farm 2, 4, 5, 6) or borrow machines from neighbours (1, 6). Farm 2 and 5 reported that such cooperation's just make so much sense for them as the costs for machines are tremendously reduced. Farm 6 is the only farm with a large loan and expressed that they are economically and time constraint due to the credit. They need to work on the side now but are still unable to further develop their farm as desired. This is not only due to the credit but is also impacted by the delayed processing of their investment subsidy application, which we will hear more about in chapter 5.2.1. Others actively try to circumvent bank credits (farm 1, 2, 4 and 7) because they value a higher degree of independency and flexibility, or just do not follow a farm branch that needs high investment. Especially when one must build a stable to continue farming, as the old one is not adaptable to the new circumcisions (farm 6). Thus, most participants actively try to distance themselves from bank institutions. That was even found to have influence on the trajectory of some farms, meaning what farm branch is pursued and which ones are left behind (farm 2 and 7).

Farm 1 and 4 lease land, where farm 4 does face constraints in the kind of land that is available to lease. Hannes tells me that the big farms get the good land to lease, and they only get the steeper, smaller or less fertile plots. Farm 1 leases land from a friend, only to reach a minimum farm size of 5 hectares, so that both farm members can enjoy full social security. However, they do not need the land for production purposes. Farm 5 is experiencing constraints regarding land availability resulting from their location in a village as they thus must deal with communal politics in several regards: the urge for building land, cables and canals in their fields and the location of the fields spread around the village. Especially the urge for building land brought them in an interesting situation. Part of their land has been dedicated to building land, but they decided not to sell, nor to build. The commune threatened them to rededicate it to grassland again if they do not build a canal connection. Out of resistance they did not follow along.

5.1.2 Autonomy from – degrees of commodification

In this chapter I will present the findings about farm-level autonomy from mercantile productive resources, which are presented along Lume method criterions. Autonomy from mercantile productive resources can be understood as van der Ploeg's (2018) degrees of commodification. The criterions are *third party land*, *Seeds, seedlings, propagative material, offspring*, *water*, *fertilizers*, *fodder / animal feed* and *third party work.*

*Table 5: findings for **autonomy from** at the farm-level regarding mercantile productive resources*

	third party land	**Seeds, seedlings, propagative material, offspring**	**water**	**fertilizer**	**Fodder / animal feed**	**third party labour**
farm 1	yes	partly themselves; buy from ReinSaat[3] and Bingenheim[3]	[4]	make compost; buy rock flour	pasture, hay	no
farm 3	no	BioSaat[1]	[4]	cow dung	pasture, silage	yes: 3 female employees on a hourly basis
farm 5	no	offspring on farm; seeds*	[4]	cow dung	pasture, silage buy little extra from farmer close by	no
farm 2	no	BioSaat[1]; Hemp (must buy new every year due to legislation)	[4]	winter greening; tillage; residues into the soil; crop rotation; under sowing; intercrops;	-	no

				fallow fields; once bought organic dung		
farm 6	no	offspring on farm; seeds from Lagerhaus[2]	[4]	make compost	pasture, hay; buy little extra for nutrient coverage	no
farm 4	yes	vegetables: partly themselves; buy from ReinSaat[3] and Sativa[3] arable farming: partly produced by themselves, if necessary, it is bought from Lagerhaus[2]	[4]	cow dung	pasture, hay	no
farm 7	no	BioSaat[1]; offspring on farm	[4]	cow dung	pasture, silage	no

[1] BioSaat offers pre-cleaning, drying and storage through to organic seed production, consumer grain processing and the dehulling of spelt, einkorn and oats; farms don't necessarily buy seeds there, but use the services above
[2] Lagerhaus is a agricultural retail chain
[3] Reinsaat, Bingenheim and Sativa are organic seed suppliers
[4] connected to public water infrastructure; most have their own sources as well; for details see table 4

For the criterions third party land and water see the previous chapter 5.1.1.

To obtain seeds, seedlings, propagative material, and offspring needed for production several sources are drawn on, also Lagerhaus. While one farm seemed to be uncritical about the retail chain, others try to avoid it. Lagerhaus is a retail chain in Austria that provides agricultural supplies, equipment, and services to farmers and rural customers. Seeds for vegetables are, if possible, produced at the farms, but also bought. When it comes to grains, BioSaat was mentioned as important partner for some farms (2, 3, 7). BioSaat offers pre-cleaning, drying and storage through to organic seed production, consumer grain processing and the dehulling of spelt, einkorn and oats. The farms don't necessarily buy seeds there, but also use the services. The company has been established by peasants through EU funding (Steyrl interviewed by Forster 2024) in 1996. According to Clara from farm 7, who belongs to the previous generation, BioSaat was established because they feared for their seeds due to EU accession. Farm 3, where the previous generation was a founding member of BioSaat, produces the largest generational stock of spelt varieties in Central Europe, which is processed by BioSaat, where they are shareholders, as well as renting out the land for the BioSaat infrastructure. Also, the father-in-law of Susanna from farm 2, was involved in the establishment of Biosaat. This finding shows that already the previous generation was actively shaping their surrounding that is still of use for and valued by the current farming generation.

Feed and fodder almost only derive from the farms themselves, only farm 5 and 6 buy a little bit extra. Both these farms are concentrated on milk production, thus they also feed their animals concentrated feeds, besides making silage or hay and providing pasture. The others provide the latter three for their animals. But neither

farm 1, nor farm 3, 4, and 7 feed their animals concentrated feeds, revealing their extensive farming style.

Fertilizers are produced by all farms themselves. Only farm 2 bought organic dung once, as the farm is animal free. They apply other strategies to keep the soil fertile (see table 5). Farm 3, 7 and 4 directly use the cow dung on their soil, while farm 1 and 6 make compost.

5.1.3 Collective autonomy: between farms, with the non-farming community and at the level of the market

Turning now away from looking at farm level autonomy, I will present the findings on collective autonomy, that are as well highly relevant for the meaning of autonomy for these peasants. For van der Ploeg & Schneider (2022), four more levels of autonomy exist. Relevant findings have occurred on the level of cooperation between farms, as well as on the level of food markets.

Cooperation between farms was found in most participating farms, some more than others. To give some examples, very common are machinery cooperation's (farm 2 and 5), but also sharing a slurry tank (farm 6), pressing the juice, or making pasta for the neighbouring farmer (between farm 3 and 7), further the cultivation of buckwheat and lentils was undertaken by two farms as a cooperation (farm 1). And of course, the establishment of BioSaat resulted from peasant cooperation many years ago as has been shown in chapter 5.1.2. Clara from farm 7 talks about another collective peasant project in the past:

> "The organic association Erde&Saat played a key role in shaping the farms in the early 90s. Because we learnt organic farming in practice by meeting monthly, not monthly, almost weekly with a different peasant during the growing season and in the first ten years all the farms were very open. […] It motivated us to try things. We had an exchange. We supported each other, even though we had the same products, or we could have been competitors. We were. And yet we supported each other by saying, hey, there's someone who also makes it, buy from them. I have enough customers here anyway or do it a little differently, because that would be in demand."

Erde&Saat Association she further tells, was important for them, as back then BioAustria that is now the biggest organic association in Austria (BioAustria Verband, n.d) moved into the newly emerging supermarkets. They either did not or could not keep pace with this development and thus many went back to direct marketing of their produce, where Erde&Saat provided a better fit. When looking at the guiding principles of Erde&Saat this becomes evident, as they stand for peasant communities and social structures, emphasising regional seeds, to sustain and cultivate peasant economies and further peasant cooperation's etc. (Erde&Saat n.d.). An unexpected finding was also the great amount of cooperation's participants had with the non-farming community around them. While farm 1 is

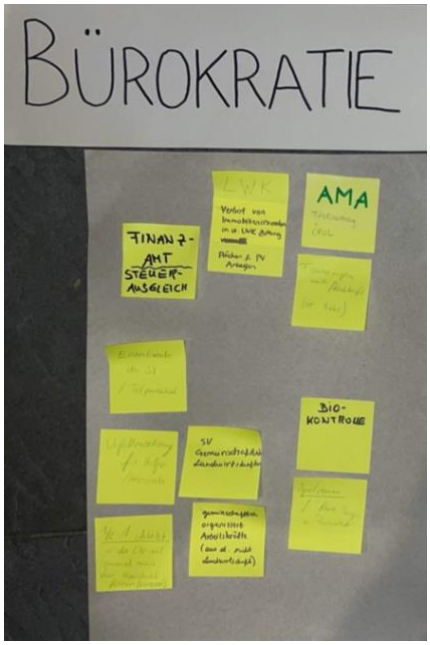
part of an exchange circle with one hundred members, trading an hour for an hour of any work, farm 2 has started a food-coop with ten other families on their farm, and as well hosts school classes for educational purposes, again another farm (5) operates a vegetable field with ten other families.

The prevailing channels for selling the product of participating farms is through a farm shop directly at the farm. Two sell their produce through the local farmers market (farm 1 and 4), that is organised and operated by the selling farmers, while one only (farm 6), and one also sells to the diary (farm 5). The reasons for direct marketing, farm shop or farmers market, are that the farm can stay small and diverse, that value added can be generated through on-farm processing, that chains are shortened, but also the possibility to adapt to changes and stay flexible. Moreover, it was partly conditioned by supermarketization as has been demonstrated above.

5.2 Bureaucracies: diverse findings

These bureaucracies emerged throughout the interviews, followed by a group interview with Lea and Susanne from farm 5 and 2, merely focusing on bureaucracies. In this group interview the three main categories where established. These categories are first, the public corporation AgrarMarkt Austria, that is responsible for implementing the national plan for the Common Agricultural Policy. Second, the tax office and social security and third, the federal associations of the organic certification bodies. These categories are separated for improved visualisation and the subsequent analysis, however it is the combination of all that result in the experiences of people. In the following chapters I will show the empirical findings according to the three categories.

Figure 1: Poster made during the group interview capturing the categories (picture taken by author)



5.2.1 CAP and Agrarmarkt Austria

The Austrian strategic plan for implementing the new Common Agricultural Policy for the period 2023 – 2027 has brought some changes to the previous periods. Such as the regular satellite imaging of the land or new eco-schemes in the first pillar that are complemented by the already existing Austrian programme for the promotion of environmentally friendly, extensive agriculture that protects the natural habitat (ÖPUL) in the second pillar (BML 2024a). The implementation body for all CAP measures is the public corporation Agrarmarkt Austria (AMA) that was introduced

in 1993. All participants mentioned bureaucracies relating to CAP policy implementation as demanding, and most of them are depended on the subsidies for their income. Lea told me that "*[i]t wasn't that much better, but it has got massively worse [bureaucracies in the new CAP period] […] I think you either like farming or you don't, and then you just put up with it*." Clara from the previous farming generation from farm 7, stated that bureaucracies were always a difficult topic and never easy and Lucia from farm 3 does not hide her feelings: "*It's all linked to funding, for which we are unfortunately dependent. That's why we are involved everywhere and allow ourselves to be enslaved everywhere."* Before coming to more specific topics, I want to emphasise that it is the sum of the total that is so energy consuming for participants, reaching from time to feelings of dependencies.

ÖPUL: over-bureaucratic

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions, and Water Management emphasises the many programs' farmers can now participate in, in total 25 programs only in ÖPUL, enabling flexible use of diverse programs for many farmers (BML 2024a). The number of programs was seen critically, especially when one has many farm activities and thus makes use of many programs. Lucia, from farm 3, who participates in all but one ÖPUL programs tells me: "*And it's so over-bureaucratic that if you have a lot of farm branches, you can't really be so intelligent as to memorise it all."* At the same time *"I can't believe that. Because I've done the maths. But it actually became less [the subsidies compared to the previous year] and actually the effort, the bureaucratic effort has increased so much."* One critique that several peasants brought forth was that there is no recognition, nor financial equalisation for being a diverse farm in general, for having many farm activities, even though that would be in line with ÖPUL goals. Farm 1 stated that everyone can see the diversity, why should they go through all these procedures, why cannot for example the organic control report what they see to other institutions and save themselves a lot of time.

Satellite monitoring: inflexibility and surveillance

Brought up by three farms (farm 2, 3, 5) was the new satellite imaging, where one can be checked every three days. Susanna from farm 2 says: "*Yes, no matter which hedges you cut back or don't cut back, whether the hedges then cast a shadow and that can be taken into account [in the subsidy calculations]*", but also that they can exactly see what they do when in their field, results in a feeling of being monitored. This accuracy results in inflexibility of the system and that was viewed as constraint. One cannot just decide to spontaneously cut down a tree that is marked as a landscape element, because this would have to be in the application for this period Lea and Susanne from farm 5 and 2 reported. They further observed that many farmers in the region thus cut down their fruit trees (as landscape elements,

not relevant for their production). This was done so they are not in the digital system and no new bureaucracies occur for them. As if you have landscape elements, you must deal with the bureaucracies, and farmers where scared of such.

AMA online: tied hands

Since January 2023 it is only possible to apply through the AMA online platform for subsidies. New regulations are often post-boned for years, thus participants have not reckoned with it to truly happen on the stated date. However, several participants reported that the platform does not properly work, and as everything is only online, not even the employees that are usually in charge for their applications can interfere in the system. This is only tedious for most, however for a young couple, that has just started farming two years ago, the resulting problems are more severe, as the couple has built a stable in 2022 and applied for investment fund, as Kerstin tells me:

> "Application possible again from 1 January 2023. Then we prepared everything and sat together to apply for it in January. Then the internet system didn't work. Then we somehow managed to get it together a few days later. It was more complicated than necessary anyway because the software didn't work properly. […] Now we've got to the point where we've been able to submit all the documents he still needs. We've sent them all over. It's all there. But he would now have to come for an on-site inspection. But he can't, because the system doesn't yet allow him to check the application so that he can approve it. We don't even have the authorisation. We have submitted it, but we still don't have authorisation for it to be accepted, because the IT system can't do that. And we can't expect to be able to bill anything before the autumn. Autumn 2024. And that just drags on."

She also directly expressed that they are economically constraint due to the credit limiting them for the moment to further develop their farms. In the future they plan to process and direct market the meat and get some pigs for food self-sufficiency. But for now, the couple pays interest, as long as they can pay back the money, and that is long prolonged due to the deficiencies of the new system.

LEADER: mixed findings

Three farms have one or more times applied for funding through LEADER, which is a local development strategy in the second pillar of the CAP. While LEADER provided financial support for their projects, the implementation procedure was seen critical. While farm 7 was very neutral about LEADER, mentioning them as partners in the past year, not leaving a negative comment, the other two (farm 3 and 4) associated it with high bureaucratic demands, making it unattractive to specific kinds of people. Lucia from farm 3, who made use of LEADER three times, reported that the applications get harder and harder over the years. Extra burdens come with projects that also have an educational purpose, as she explains:

> "They put us through our paces, and you actually have to be practised at talking and not be too shy, otherwise you won't have the confidence to do it. And I don't really think that's okay. There are now people who do a lot of good things, but perhaps don't want to speak in front of 20 mayors and the district governor. So really? Yes. Well, that really is. That was not easy."

The other farms know of LEADER, however, have not yet made use of it and are currently not planning to do so, one explicitly naming that they don't want to deal with the bureaucracies (farm 1). Some projects enabled through LEADER where a farm shop, a bee hut, a seminar room (farm 3), a pond (farm 4) and a processing room (farm 7). At the same time bureaucracies associated with LEADER applications increased over the years, which is in line with the perception about CAP generally.

Subsidies, investments and funding: small farms, different issues

Peasants of very small farms face rather different issues. Two farms under study are relatively small, farm 1 farms five hectares and farm 4 ten hectares, both state that little land means little money. Hannes from farm 4 says:

> "The impacts of the agricultural policy are not so massive for us because we have a small farm, which means we are not so affected financially by the direct payments etc. because we simply don't have many direct payments. […]

According to the two participants bureaucratic work remains more or less the same as for bigger farms and it is especially time consuming to find out about the measurements one can participate in. Thus, both farms do not know all the measurements they possibly could participate in but do participate where it is easy and accessible. Farm 4 faces another constraint that correlates with size. Hannes wanted to apply for an investment fund for a baking oven, however he could not reach the minimum sum of 15.000 Euros that is required for the application. He sees this critically: "*Especially the small investments, the small businesses that don't have large investments, the ones that lose it, the money so to speak."* The peasants from the other small farm (farm 1) wanted to apply for young farmers funding in CAP direct payment measures. However, even though they achieved an income in the first year that neither they themselves, and the Chamber of Agriculture thought was possible, they got the feedback that there were only three and a half hours of work per week per person possible on that land. This led them to leave the application behind completely, as according to them there are also demands associated with subsidies.

5.2.2 Tax Office and social Insurance

On farm processing and refinement: limiting income

On farm processing and refinement is enabling participants a higher value added, however it cannot be pursued without limits. According to participants, it must be a secondary farming activity, meaning that less than fifty percent of the produce is allowed to be processed or refined and less than 45.000 Euros of revenue can be acquired through such. Because of that farms have to report to the tax office, as they have to provide information of their income to prove that they do not exceed these limits. It is in relation to social insurance, as processed products are also relevant for such. This limit for processed and refined products poses concrete problems for two farms (1 and 7), but also others mentioned it on the side. These farms are right on the border, thus struggling to not exceed the amounts allowed. Further these participants reported that it is hardly possible to live from primary production only. Thus, according to them, if they would become a business, this would result in stricter hygiene regulations, different taxing, need of an operating licence etc., thus heightened bureaucracy and costs in total, resulting in a force to specialize and grow in size. A young couple from farm 7, who took over the farm from the previous generation not too long ago, both also working outside the farm, would if they both wanted to be at the farm full-time and pursue their newly established farm branch, have to transition into a business. Thus, if they wanted to maintain the farm small and diverse, they would have to keep working on the side, because they could not make a living of that due to these tax regulations.

Gender: struggling for acknowledgement

A gendered dimension emerged during the interview with Lea from farm 5, revealing the imprint of patriarchy in current social security bureaucracies. She told me:

> "So, my husband pays just as much social insurance as he would if he were alone. Only the pension contribution is less. So, I don't know whether it's completely split in half or whether it's a little less for me. I honestly have to say I don't know."

Lea and her husband are both working full-time on the farm, thus they applied for two full-time workers for social security, which was turned down and replaced with one and a half positions instead. The argument was that one member needs to care for the household. She could not do anything to change that. Further, as has been demonstrated all participating farms produce food for their own consumption, while Lea sees it as important source of her income and tried to get the work associated with subsistence, that is cooking, recognised as working time.

> “I did full cost accounting and wrote cooking as working time. That was thrown out because it's not an income-relevant activity. Yes, but then I said that self-sufficiency is an important part of our income, I want to calculate how many vegetables I take from the farm, for example. Yes, that's from the farm. And I said, what would it be like if I paid someone to cook for me, then I would probably have to write it down as an expense. But if I do it myself, it's not relevant to my income.”

Social security: small farms different issues

Social security means health insurance, pension insurance and accident insurance, is thus a necessity for participants and precondition to work and age in security. I will make the case for Julia and Maria from farm 1, who together have a five hectares farm in cooperation with each other, where three hectares are rented. It took Julia and Maria two years of research, participating in seminars and talking to many different people, to find the right information, that in the end lead them to a creative solution for getting full social security for both.

> ***Maria****:* “So it's just two hectares of our own land and three hectares that we lease. And, um, that's exactly what we do because of this one rule, which is always difficult to explain in detail. But the point is that you simply need the threshold of five hectares to get full insurance.
> ***Julia****:* “It's about making it credible to the social security system that you can make a living from it. There's this rule about either the unit value or the number of hectares. “
> ***Interviewer****:* “Do you need the land?”
> ***Maria***: “We don't need it. Actually, we don't. Well, yes.

They thus started to rent land only to achieve full social security for both, as the unit value, nor the size meet the demands by the social insurance company, even though as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter their earnings where high enough to support them both. There is a lack of adaptability in this system to find individual solutions for individual cases they said.

5.2.3 Organic certification

Certification is seen as enabling

The participating farms are all certified organic, one is a certified Demeter farm (farm 3). Participants are organic by choice, as organic certification is generally seen as enabling. Also, their aspirations for how to farm are in line with the organic regulations, and sometimes much higher (farm 3 and 4). Mentioned benefits where a higher income (farm 5), to stand out (farm 3), less vulnerability in crisis (farm 6 and 7), as they are less dependent on the market on the in- and output side, but also less threats through new restrictive and unforeseeable regulations regarding animal welfare and the environment (farm 6) as they anyways have a very high standard. Even before there was an official organic control body, a group of peasants that

produced organically, organised through Erde&Saat Association, in the region Mühlviertel started to meet up on the farms to discuss what could be improved and gave advise to each other as elaborated on in chapter 5.1.3. However, nowadays there are high demands associated with organic certification, as I will show in the following paragraphs.

Regulations and record-keeping: overly complicated?

It is first, the general number of regulations and record-keeping obligations that are hardly manageable. One participant, Susanna from farm 2, reported in relation to these: "*it's often so opaque, you don't even know if you're doing it right".* A more concrete example is when farms want to produce organic certified processed foods. As not only the ingredients need to be certified, but also the recipe. This diminishes possibilities for creativity, as this means paperwork but also higher certification costs, especially if one is making small badges and a wide range of products, which is very usual for the farms under study. A story by Lea from farm 5 will underline the obscurity:

> "And then I harvested herbs from our certified meadow. Seven different ones, and I submitted them as a recipe. Because you have to submit a recipe like that to the inspection body. Then I was sent a data sheet that I had to fill in with the exact names of these plants. In other words, the botanical name of the plant genus, how much of the plant I used and the meadow where it grows. Then I had to have every single one of these plants certified, even though they grow on our certified meadow. And then you have to write the recipe with the certified organic sugar and the plants. And then that gets submitted and then it gets certified. And then I pay for that. […] And they really went for a walk with Josef, the inspector, to see if they were growing there."

This was not the only incidence for her. When she ones had apricots not beautiful enough for direct consumption, she decided to make a yogurt with them, resulting in a similar complicated procedure. Lea wishes for a tolerance limit for products from organic farms if they want to try something new, so "*you can save yourself all the bureaucracy*" as she says.

Discussion

6.1 The meaning of autonomy for peasants in the Mühlviertel region

6.1.1 The self-controlled resource base

Autonomy to refers to the self-controlled resource base, that is for van der Ploeg (2018) done through farming practices such as improving soil fertility or trying new cultivars. Said in other words, it is about ensuring that the resource base remains self-controlled (Ibid.). Several findings from chapter 5.1.1 indicate how peasants under study create and defend their self-controlled resource base. Especially when looking at the findings regarding water availability, it becomes visible that they actively secure their water demand. This enables them to keep control of their resource base not only now, but in the future. The same can be said for farm 5 with their location in the village. They defend their agricultural land that recently has been dedicated to building land, through actively resisting to selling the land or building on it. Even ignoring threats by the commune to dedicate it back which would result in a huge loss of value. These active struggles align with van der Ploeg's (2018) construction and defence of the self-resource base in the struggle for autonomy.

As has been demonstrated in chapter 5.1.1 food self-sufficiency plays a grand role for participants. Van der Ploeg (2018) does not consider food self-sufficiency in his concept of autonomy at first sight. However, it can be found under self-provisioning, which refers to reusing part of what the farm produces for reproduction. Self-provisioning enlarges autonomy as it creates a distance towards the market. I will come back to self-provisioning in the next chapter 6.1.2.

Pluriactivity, which refers to pursuing more activities than just farming, was sought for several reasons that are partly contradicting the theory. On the on hand my findings align with van der Ploeg (2018) who argues that pluriactivity is sought for reducing dependency by supplementing the income. Indeed, several participants have brought the argument that if they need, they will be able to get a job in the city, and by only knowing that they are more encouraged to farm the way they want

and try out new things. On the other hand, if the participants do not have to work outside the farm, they sometimes still do. Or explicitly do not want to have their income supporting farming activities. This then would more align with Jansen et al. (2022) who argue that pluriactivity cannot be reduced only to the pursue of peasant autonomy. Even though my findings reflect both standpoints, the mere existence of findings that align with Jansen et al. (2022) makes clear that the analytical value of pluriactivity is limited and the specific contexts must be considered, further posing problems to the intrinsic meaning of the concept. This connects to Jansen et al.'s (2022) critique of van der Ploeg (2018), that exploiting non-commodity circuits (e.g. family labour) is not unknown to capitalist generalized commodity production. I found that three participants do not fit into the picture of the self-exploiting peasant, as they have an emphasis on making holidays and having enough leisure in how they pursue farming. Thus, self-exploitation must not occur in peasant agriculture always, which underline van der Ploeg's (2018) agency perspective.

The findings from farm 1, which leases land solely to ensure full social security, contradict van der Ploeg's (2018) literature, which suggests decreased autonomy when land is held by a third party, as full control over the resource base is not given. I argue that in this scenario, autonomy is actually increased, as the lease doesn't introduce new constraints. Additionally, they can now both be fully involved in farming without needing other jobs, as they did before but didn't desire.

To conclude, active engagement in the defence and construction in the self-controlled resource base was found, showcasing the struggle for autonomy. Relevant to all participants is food self-sufficiency, meaning self-provisioning with certain foods, which enlarges autonomy from the market on the input side. Further, it became evident that some findings do not align with the theoretical framework proposed by van der Ploeg (2018). Where peasants are seen as less autonomous because they lease land, the opposite can be true. When, and why pluriactivity is pursued varies from case to case and does not necessarily feed into developing the resource base. Thus, the context in which a farm is situated needs to be considered, which is strongly emphasised by Jansen et al. (2022). Further the picture of the self-exploiting peasant has not been found among some peasants under study, underlining the agency perspective by van der Ploeg (2018).

6.1.2 Degrees of commodification

The findings show that seeds are usually bought by participants, either from the agricultural retail store (less desired), the online organic seed shops or through BioSaat. Analytically, this would mean high degrees of commodification in this regard, thus low degrees of autonomy (van der Ploeg 2018). The question remains if they would be more autonomous if they would produce the seeds themselves, posing the issue of the normativity of the concept. Here a collective solution seems

more feasible as another finding revealed. EU accession and the expected structural changes, that was the loss of regional seeds, triggered the establishment of BioSaat by peasants in the region as a response, which is still important for the current farming generation. It was the creation of collective autonomy through the establishment of a company to produce one's own seeds, facilities for storage and processing, to keep it regional, which can hardly be achieved by a single farm only. It must be mentioned that this collective agency would have not been possible without the Bergland-Aktionssfond by the EU (Steyrl interviewed by Forster 2024, p. 5). Thus, low degrees of commodification regarding seeds does not always implicate higher degrees of autonomy, as some projects are better pursued and achieved as a collective.

While seeds are mostly not part of self-provisioning of these peasants, fertilizers, fodder, animal feed, offspring and on farm processing (see table 2) are. This shows not only how these peasants recycle nutrition's, but also how autonomy in relation to the market is increased through their practices, enhancing their autonomy through operating in non-commodity circuits (van der Ploeg 2018).

To conclude, these farms have relatively low degrees of commodification. Only when it comes to seeds, this is not the case with reason. Looking at grains, peasants have successfully carved out autonomy on the level of the market, to sustain their regional seeds. I argue that regarding seeds, collective solutions are more viable, as the effort to produce seeds cannot be undergone by a single farm only.

6.1.3 Collective autonomy: autonomy at the level of cooperation and the market

Van der Ploeg (2018) emphasises the role of cooperation in achieving autonomy, as it makes possible to achieve "autonomy at higher levels of aggregation" (p. 40). For him cooperation is a necessity for facing a hostile context and becomes visible in for example machinery cooperatives or peasant managed irrigation systems (Ibid.) The findings in table 4 and chapter 5.1.3 reveal that peasant under study engage in myriad cooperation's, including machinery cooperatives and a water cooperative, but also pressing juice and slaughtering for another. Cooperation, according to van der Ploeg (2018) reduces dependencies on banks and the market, thus lowers the degree of commodification. My findings also show that machinery cooperatives reduce the financial burden that arises from the need to buy machines, but also pressing juice or slaughtering reduce dependencies on markets. More collective than the mere cooperation between farms was found at Erde&Saat, the seed company, and BioSaat, the organic association. Both projects created collective autonomy. In the case of Erde&Saat peasants can get their seeds processed, stored, or buy seeds regionally, meaning a distantiation from undesired market through the establishment of a market. Van der Ploeg & Schneider (2022)

do talk about the creation of markets as nested markets, however they do refer to food markets, not others. My findings show significant similarities of Erde&Saat and nested markets. Erde&Saat was first, established by peasants in the region, second, it aimed at providing and keeping alive regional seeds and to provide services that otherwise would probably have been outsourced, keeping the regional distinctiveness alive (van der Ploeg (2018). Erde&Saat was further established as reaction to EU accession, to defend their regional seeds, which reveals their intention for staying local. This can be seen as a struggle and defence of their resource base and as way to bypass the expected structural changes. Although the times of BioSaat association Clara talked about are over, it reinforced their autonomy by mutual advice on how to farm ecologically, which can be seen in van der Ploeg's (2018) terms as farming in co-production with nature, thus strengthening their resource base. But also, they encouraged each other to move back into direct marketing and keep themselves out in the ongoing of supermarketization, enlarging their autonomy from markets.

The cooperation found between farms and the community around them were also found to increase autonomy, just as much as cooperation's between farms, which is not discussed by van der Ploeg (2018), nor van der Ploeg & Schneider (2022). To exemplify this, while exchanging an hour for an hour of any kind of work, help needed on the farm can be generated without additional costs and by demand which has the same outcome of cooperation between farms, as seen by van der Ploeg (2018). The establishment of a food-coop enlarges distantiation from the market, not only for the farm, but also for the other families and the farms the produce is bought from, creating collective autonomy from markets. The last example of the collective vegetable field can again be seen as a further distantiation from the market by producing food for their own consumption, another benefit, Lea tells me, is that you can grow much more together, and it is much more fun. From these examples I argue that generally cooperation's with the local community should be considered in looking at autonomy and how it can be enlarged not only for peasants, but for the community. They together pursue projects related to food, where autonomy tends to extend into the spheres of the non-farming community.

Two farms sell their produce at the local farmers market, participating in a nested market in van der Ploeg & Schneider's (2022) terms. While four sell their produce at their farm shop, thus also creating autonomy through the level of the market, by the creation of markets (Ibid.).

A major critique is that these autonomies can be only achieved by forming new relationships in social and economic spheres, thus new dependencies upon people and institutions (Jansen et al. 2022). This results in the normative meaning of the concept, as autonomy is here generally sought from 'relations of dependencies', as van der Ploeg (2018) would say, which are bad. My findings reveal that collective projects, such as the establishment of BioSaat, the farm visits in the 90s by Erde & Saat peasants, but also the vegetable field that is farmed by several families and the

food coop on one of the farms, all depend highly on other human individuals, meaning that these would not be possible without them. Besides these humans' agency, the context these peasants are in, as well as the non-peasant agents, conditioned these projects, be it EU accession or general capitalist agrarian development. Humans working together pursuing common goals, finding solutions, and enduring time make these projects achievable. Thus, I agree that they are dependent on each other, resulting in relations of dependencies, however together creating autonomy from something that is not desired. Jansen et al. (2022) argue that it is exactly these dependencies, that have also been found in this case, that lie "at the heart of agroecology and food sovereignty that emphasizes collective organization, solidarity and reciprocity (Naylor, 2014; Rosset & Altieri 2017, see Jansen et al. 2022, p. 501). These movements are generally seen as contradicting capitalist agrarian development, aiming to provide alternatives from such. Projects, that can be gathered under these terms thus inherently are aiming at autonomy from or within capitalist agrarian development. And of course that is normative, but the current issues we are facing within the food system, shaped strongly by capitalism, urge for solutions that can possibly be found by such (Clapp 2016). And I do not think that one needs to neglect that endogenous exploitation or accumulation form below occurs, another critique by Jansen et al. (2022), within these movements, nor in autonomous projects, just as anywhere, but must be included in the analysis of such and has been done for example by Villalba-Eguiluz et al. (2023). Thus, I argue, that dependencies and context form collective projects that aim at one or another autonomy, not being inherently good, but actively finding deviant ways from the dominating one.

To conclude, the findings align with the theory and show how peasants resist the market on the output and input side, thus enlarge their autonomy through distantiation from the market (van der Ploeg 2018; Ploeg & Schneider 2022). This is the outcome of individual action, as in form of the farm shop, partly triggered by the structural change of supermaketization, and collectively as in form of the food coop, the vegetable field or farmer's market.

6.1.4 Summarizing the meaning of autonomy among peasants in the Mühlviertel region

In this chapter I tried to analyse the meaning of autonomy for peasants under study and by doing so answering the first research question. Peasants under study pursue several practices that constitute autonomy. From actively creating and defending their self-controlled resource base, to self-provisioning, resulting in low degrees of commodification. According to van der Ploeg's (2018) concept of autonomy these peasants, except for farm 6, can be said to be relatively autonomous at the farm level. They also engage in myriad cooperation's with other farms, but also with the

community around them and as has been shown these contribute to further enlarging their autonomy. This leads to the conclusion that all of them achieve more or less autonomy at the level of cooperation. Six farms circumvent the conventional markets and sell either through a farm shop or a farmers market which constitutes autonomy through the establishment of markets (Ploeg & Schneider 2022). Lastly, collective projects that enlarged autonomy have been found in BioSaat company and Erde&Saat organic association, both of them were influenced by structural changes, such as EU accession for the former, and supermarketization for the latter.

Some findings however did not align with the concept by van der Ploeg (2018). First, my findings show that renting land does not necessarily constrain autonomy but was a way for a small farm to achieve full social security for both farming members. Moreover my findings indicate that pluriactivity occurs for several reasons, not out of necessity only, neither is it subordinate to the resource base, which poses problems to the analytical value of pluriactivity as Jansen et al. (2022) already suggested.

6.2 Bureaucracies: limiting or enabling autonomy?

6.2.1 CAP and Agrarmarkt Austria

ÖPUL: red tape bureaucracy?

The goal of ÖPUL is to further environmentally just farming systems, where a high diverse farming system would align with. However the 25 programs only in ÖPUL have been shown to result in considerable bureaucratic burdens for participants, even though compared to other EU countries, Austria implemented one single body that jointly administers the diverse programs (Falconer & Whitby 2000). Van der Ploeg (2018) criticizes that the level for implementing rural development policies within EU was not set lower than the state axis, this is also the case with ÖPUL in the new CAP period. For him this runs counter autonomy that is enlarged when rural development is an endogenous process, at the opposite he sees rural development structured as a megaproject. This resonated with my findings that participants want to get their many farm activities and quite heterogeneous diversity acknowledged as a whole, which should stand for itself. Their diverse practices do not fit together with how rural development policies are currently organized. This results into overly complicated application procedures for them. Thus, the current ÖPUL does not further their practices that constitute autonomy, namely, to develop a highly diverse farm, which can be seen as rural development as an endogenous process. To scale up, Linares Quero et al. (2022) identified agri-environmental measures, such as ÖPUL as generally supporting the agroecological transition. However limited acknowledgement though the program for diverse farming

systems and the vast amount of paperwork related to it, impact this potential. And I will show again in one of the following chapters called *Small farms, less dependency?* how that impacts smaller farms autonomy.

Satellite monitoring: threatening the self-controlled resource base

Satellite monitoring was conceived as reducing flexibility in farming and as surveillance of the land and themselves. For van der Ploeg (2018) autonomy to farm after their own aspirations and economic perspectives refers to the self-controlled resource base and ultimately the freedom of how to structure one's own work day. Satellite monitoring thus poses a threat on the self-controlled resource base, controlling if farmers comply with what is in their applications, significantly reducing their autonomy. State led bureaucratic programmes are "at odds with the heterogeneity of the social and natural world" (Ibid. p,120), which was also perceived like that by participants.

AMA online (application platform): red tape bureaucracy?

Farm 6, when looking the tables in chapter 5.1. sells to the diary and is in dept with the bank, which for van der Ploeg (2018) means high degrees of commodification. This results in low degrees of autonomy regarding the market and the bank. Their future goals that are processing and direct marketing the meat and having two pigs for food self-sufficiency would distance part of their operation from the market. For van der Ploeg (2018) this would constitute autonomy by self-provisioning and reducing dependency. However, through their credit they are economically constraint to further develop their operation. This would be the case anyways, but the new AMA online platform made them wait for already 2 years to get the investment fund, which further enhances their costs in interests to the bank. Not even AMA staff members can interfere in the process as the system does not allow that, restricting action on both sides. The new and not properly working online platform took away the agency of all actors involved, which resulted in an extremely standardized procedure, leaving no room for individual solutions and hinders efficiency and progress, leading to the conclusion of bureaucratic 'red tape'.

LEADER: enabling autonomy?

The rural development strategy LEADER within the second pillar of the CAP, was found to serve as financial support for projects that further autonomy. Moreover, it has been highlighted as an effective tool for furthering the agroecological transition (Linares Quero et al. 2022). As shown in the findings LEADER enabled several projects, these where a farm shop, a processing room, a bee hut and a seminar room and a pond. The first three contribute to enlarge distance from the market, the seminar room enlarges multifunctionally on the farm, and the last, further strengthens the resource base (van der Ploeg 2018). Thus, all these projects further

autonomy. For van der Ploeg (2018) rural development policies more often than not contradict practices by peasants, which has not been found in these cases. This could also be the case as LEADER is organized on a regional level, with accounts to van der Ploeg's (2018) urge for intermediary institutions. It was not the specific projects that contradicted the heterogenous practices by peasants, but the administrative work associated with it that makes it uninteresting for certain people, in my cases specifically farm 1. Also, the increase in bureaucratic work associated with it that was brought forth by one farm, which aligns with the general perception of participants that CAP bureaucracies have increased over time in all spheres.

Small farms, neglected but less dependent?

My findings have shown that the two small farms face rather different issues than their larger colleagues. However, bureaucratic work remains more or less the same as for bigger farms (Falconer 2000). This underlines the general notion, that small farms have it harder to participate, thus participate less often and receive less money (Falconer & Whitby 2000; Biagini et al. 2020; Linares Quero et al. 2022; ECVC 2021). On the other side, small farms do have in this regard more room for manoeuvre as they do not build heavily on subsidies for farming, thus they have a higher degree of autonomy regarding their resource base. This is a twisted story as they receive very little subsidies, while providing public goods for free.

When it comes to investments and young farmers funding, they cannot appropriate the resources their larger colleagues have access to, which could be great economic help to continue and further their projects. For farm 4 autonomy from the market as part of self-provisioning would be enlarged (van der Ploeg 2018), as in the case with the baking oven. In the other case (farm 1) autonomy regarding the self-controlled resource base would be enlarged, as they could use the funding to further enhance and develop their resource base as they desire. However due to their unconventional small size they did not get the money. But that did not hinder them to buy a baking oven, nor to continue farming how they aspire. They, as active agents, created these autonomies, while saving themselves all the bureaucracy. This underlines the agency perspective by van der Ploeg (2018). On the other hand, the general trend for the region, however, shows a continuous decline in the size of farms (Grüner Bericht OÖ 2023). Thus, I conclude, aligning with Biagini et al. (2020), that there is a demand for more inclusive policies for small farms.

6.2.2 Tax office and social insurance

On farm processing and refinement: limiting value added

The strict regulations for processing and refinement were found to limit autonomy from the market, while two members of one farm (7) explicitly must work elsewhere to not exceed the limit. Pluriactivity, according to van der Ploeg (2018) is a way to keep up with farming, and indeed the couple works elsewhere to keep the farm small, diverse, to deliberately not grow and specialize, thus, to remain in the peasant condition (Ibid.). On the other hand, this regulation hinders peasants to achieve a higher income, and the value generated through processing, refinement and direct marketing enables them to continue farming that way in the first place. Because as participants reported, it is hardly possible to live from primary production only. Thus, I argue that this regulation is a strict limitation to further peasant autonomy as it hinders to generate the needed value added. Linares Quero et al. (2022) found that CAP rural development measures that further processing and marketing of organic products and short value chains have potential for furthering the agroecological transition. Although the tax office is not directly related to CAP, they impact the same practices, limiting the potential for scaling up agroecology.

Social security: small farms, different issues

The findings from farm 1, that leases land only to achieve full social security stands in contradiction to the literature by van der Ploeg (2018) that sees a decrease of autonomy when land is held by a third party, as control of the resource base is not fully given. Here we find a neighbouring farmer, that is also a friend, renting land to them to achieve full social security, which means that they can both be fully employed at the farm without any constraints for their futures and health. I argue, that renting land in this case enabled autonomy, as they can now both be fully employed at the farm, as desired. Small farms are as in the previous chapter not considered in the making of policies, they however found a creative way to successfully accomplish their goal.

Gender: constraints for women only?

Not only small farms face specific issues, but also women, as has been exemplified by the stories by Lea. These occur first, in social security for her, and secondly in her work around subsistence. Current social security counts Lea as only half of a working power as one must lead the household, this will probably limit her pension, compromising her autonomy within the family in the future. This shows that autonomy is also relevant on a lower level than the household and along gender lines (Villalba-Eguiluz et al. 2023). This is also evident in her struggle for getting

her subsistence related work acknowledged, which can be seen as the defence of her self-controlled resource base. While van der Ploeg (2018) is not putting strong emphasis on gender, he recognises the important role of rural women for subsistence in peasant agriculture. Due to modernization their role was eliminated, which lowered the autonomy of their domains, often leaving them in positions of the man's helper (Ibid.) This helping positions further strengthened the males power in decision making (Rosset & Altieri 2017). This modernization also becomes apparent by how she is treated by the social security, being bound to household activities that are unvalued in current society. The valuation of subsistence related work, which is mostly done by women (van der Ploeg 2018) could enlarge women's autonomy within the household. This autonomy is achieved through agroecological practices, showing how agroecology would contribute to a more just food system (Rosset & Altieri 2017).

6.2.3 Organic certification

Certification: enables autonomy

Obtaining organic certification contributes to the autonomy of peasants by adding value to their produce that feeds into their resource base, the resource base being 'key to achieving autonomy' (van der Ploeg 2018, p. 30). But also Linares Quero et al. (2022) identified organic farming in promotion of the agroecological transition. Organic certification principles, as exemplified in the case of Erde&Saat association started out as a collective project that aimed at distinguishing themselves from conventional farmers, improving their farms and regrounding their practices back on nature (van der Ploeg 2018). This finding emphasises that it is not only about the certification itself, but also about sharing and co-creation of knowledge, to align their farming practices with organic principles. They collectively worked on achieving farm level autonomy.

Obligations and record keeping: reduce creativity

Organic certification imposes high formalization upon participants, but also regulations are complicated and hard to understand. While this does not directly constrain autonomy, organic certification for recipes does, as this means that food is processed with those recipes. This is especially the case for farms that want to produce a diverse and / or changing variety, according to what nature provides, meaning to process what is there, no matter how much it is and when, thus, to appropriate their resources as desired. Due to the strict regulations this co-production with nature is limited, as nature is not completely predictable (van der Ploeg 2018) and sometimes demands for another usage than previously, like with the apricots. This limits autonomy regarding the self-controlled resource base as the

complicated procedure may reduce the diversity of products produced (van der Ploeg 2018). Changing this regulation, as proposed by Lea, would further diversified farming systems and the diversity of food being produced locally, and thus agroecological practices (Rosset & Altieri 2017).

6.2.4 Bureaucracies impact on autonomy for peasants in the Mühlviertel Region

While ÖPUL was found to constrain autonomy, mainly due to its high bureaucratic demands and its limited acknowledgement of diversified farming systems, LEADER was found enabling for all that made use of the program. The European rural development policies thus do not predominantly contradict practices that constitute autonomy as van der Ploeg (2018) suggests. LEADER however is organized on a local level and thus aligns with van der Ploeg's (2018) demand for new intermediary institutions in the question of how rural development should be organized. Especially the smaller farms under study were found to be neglected by CAP policy making, although not limiting their autonomy per se, underlining their agency. Undeniable is the overall bureaucratic work that is associated with the CAP. As has been shown also by the implementation of CAP with AMA as the key figure, delaying important subsidies for years. The new and regular satellite imagine further extended control over farmland and into the periphery, pressuring for high accuracy and limiting flexibility of peasants under study. This underlines Marsden (1993), who emphasises how the local is tied to the centre through bureaucracies.

Also in the discussion around social security and the tax office this became evident. Regulations by the tax office constrain on farm processing and refinement, thus autonomy from the market, limiting value added for the farms. While the smallest farm struggled for full social security due to size specific constraints, their solution contradicts the literature by van der Ploeg (2018), as renting land for him shows relations of dependencies. However, it enabled the cooperative two full time jobs with full social security, which highlights their agency. Lasty, in line with Villalba-Eguiluz et al. (2023), it became clear that there are specific constraints for women only, not compromising Leas autonomy in the present, though probably in the future. Moreover her active engagement in getting her subsistence work recognised can be seen as a struggle for autonomy below the household level.

Lastly, the discussion about organic certification led to the conclusion that the certification is mainly seen as enabling, besides others, generating a higher income or resilience towards crisis. On the other side increase in regulations and rising demands for record-keeping have been found to result in increased control over farming activities. One of the main limitations for autonomy was identified in the organic certification for recipes. It limits autonomy to appropriate the land as one desires, which means that the natural resources of the land cannot be fully used,

posing constraints for farms with diverse products, and thus to a further development towards agroecological practices.

To conclude, bureaucracies were found to impact farm-level autonomy regarding the resource base but also in relation to the market. Despite the seemingly insurmountable amount of work associated with bureaucracies, they were mostly perceived as constraining autonomy. However, participants regarded LEADER and organic certification as enabling, besides the significant bureaucratic workload they entail. Bureaucracies impacting those autonomies were also found to have an impact on an agroecological transition, limiting the potential of ÖPUL and LEADER, but also the development of on-farm processing and subsequently direct marketing.

Conclusions

This case study has sought to reveal the impacts of bureaucracies on peasant autonomy for agroecological farms located in the region Mühlviertel in Austria to identify the potential role of bureaucracies as a lever for agroecology and thus a contributing to a food system transformation.

To accomplish this the meaning of autonomy for peasants in the region was first clarified by critically applying the concept of van der Ploeg (2018). Autonomy was found at the *farm-level* and in *collective forms*, as on the *level of cooperation* and *the market*. Peasants in the region are actively creating and defending their self-controlled resource base, practicing self-provisioning and co-production with nature and set "relations with the market […] that allow for autonomy" (Ibid. p.34). They further enlarge autonomy through myriad cooperation's between farmers, but also with the broader community. This does not only enhance autonomy for peasants but also the rural subjects involved. Conditioned by EU accession and supermarketization in the 90s, collective peasant projects to defend their seeds and small and diverse farming systems emerged, still impacting the present. Some empirical data however did not align with the concept by van der Ploeg (2018). First, my findings show that renting land does not necessarily show relations of dependencies but was a way for a small farm to achieve full social security for both farming members. Second, my findings indicate that pluriactivity occurs for several reasons, not out of necessity only, neither is it subordinate to the resource base, which poses problems to the analytical value of pluriactivity as Jansen et al. (2022) already suggested.

The second research question then aimed at understanding the impact of bureaucracies on their autonomy. Three categories were identified during the group interview that impose bureaucracies on participants. *CAP and Agrarmarkt Austria* related issues were all associated with increasing and high bureaucratic demand. While only LEADER promotes autonomy from the market and regarding the self-controlled resource base, the other aspects were found mainly limiting participants autonomy with inefficient application procedures and being unsupportive of highly diverse farming systems. While smaller farms received limited support through CAP, they exercised their agency. The new and regular satellite imagine further extended control into the periphery. *Social security and the tax office* limit autonomy regarding the market through the regulations for on-farm processing, but also along gender lines, posing constraints for women only. While small farms are

not considered in how social security is currently organized, they again showcased their agency. *Organic certification* overall enables autonomy by improving relations with the market but also regarding the self-controlled resource base. However, increase in regulations and rising demands for record-keeping, further enlarge control over farming activities. Lastly, the complicated certification for recipes poses constraints for farms with diverse products. These findings also have implications for the agroecological transition, as the observed bureaucracies were discovered to limit the potential of ÖPUL and LEADER programs. Additionally, they hamper the development of on-farm processing and consequently, direct marketing.

To conclude, various forms auf autonomy are evident in the meaning of autonomy for peasants in the region Mühlviertel. From farm-level autonomy to collective autonomy, at the level of cooperation and of the market. Bureaucracies have significant impact on farm-level autonomy. While being mostly constraining, the rural development strategy LEADER and organic certification enables autonomy. Small farms were neglected in policy making, but that did not hinder them to exercise their agency. A overall high demand for work related to bureaucracies, but also the increase in regulations and obligations, including the new satellite imagine underline Marsden (1993) who emphasises how the local is tied to the centre through bureaucracies. These findings also have implications for the agroecological transition, as some of the observed bureaucracies were discovered to limit agroecological practices, such as on-farm processing, direct marketing and diverse farming systems. This is relevant as it shows how bureaucracies could contribute to alternative pathways to the current food system, making it an important lever for the needed food system transformation.

7.1 Future work

While this case study gave insights into farming practices and experiences of a very limited number of participants in a very short time frame, the depth of information could be greatly enlarged. Looking at the region and these farms from a historical perspective, with an emphasis on collective autonomy, could be of special interest. Participants provided many little insights into the past, where collective struggles for autonomy and a history of resistance seemed to appear. However, this would need further investigation and could be interesting for autonomy research.

Further, the two smaller farms revealed great differences due to farm size in several aspects. While this is a very small sample size, the findings urge to conduct further research on their role under bureaucracies. I found on the one hand, which aligns with other research, that small scale farmers are generally neglected by CAP. On the other hand, and contrary to the trend of decrease in small farms, the small farms under study practice farming economically and how they aspire. The role of

autonomy and agroecology in the trajectory of small-scale farms could thus be interesting for further research.

This research showed that not only CAP related bureaucracies limit the potential for a food system transformation, but as well bureaucracies within other institutions. This could be relevant for further investigation, as mobilizing all available resources is essential to improve the prospects of a successful food system transformation.

More generally autonomy is an important concept in agroecology, the latter receiving great attention as an alternative to the current food system, thus remaining in need of further research in the future.

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Popular science summary

The current food system is characterized by long value chains, commodification, and environmental degradation. Simultaneously the neoliberal agenda and the current food system are continued to be favored by the European Common Agricultural Policy for the years to come. Bureaucracies entailed in these, tie the periphery to the centre. This raises the interest in alternatives to neoliberalism, where a focus on autonomy is highly relevant, as "it is often used to express […] to escape […] the rule of capital or the control of the state" (Vergara-Camus and Jansen 2022, p. 456). Thus, this exploratory case study revolves around the impact of bureaucracies on peasant autonomy. A qualitative methodology was employed, incorporating in-depth interviews and observations with seven peasants, two of whom were also part of a group interview. First, the research identifies different meanings of autonomy, including farm-level autonomy and forms of collective autonomy, in a regionally situated context in Mühlviertel, Austria. Second, it identifies relevant bureaucracies for peasants under study. Lastly, it examines how these bureaucracies impact their autonomy. The study concludes that bureaucracies have a significant impact on peasant autonomy. While mainly limiting it, LEADER and organic certification was found enabling. These findings also have implications for the agroecological transition, as some of the observed bureaucracies were discovered to limit agroecological practices, such as on-farm processing, direct marketing and diverse farming systems. This is relevant as it shows how bureaucracies can contribute to alternative pathways to the current food system, making it an important lever for the needed food system transformation. Thus, this study has policy implications, but also contributes to the current debate on autonomy within peasant studies.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

(translated from German)

1. **Introduce yourselves and your farm:**
   Main income/side income
   Residents, workers
   Branches of operation
   Processing / refinement
   Marketing
   Investments
   Typical workday
   Current status

2. **Why do you engage in agriculture?**
   Events or influences that led you to this decision?
   Motivation

3. **Why did you choose these branches of operation?**
   Advantages/challenges of this combination
   Plans to add new branches or change existing ones?
   Why? External/internal factors

4. **Why did you choose this form of processing?**
   Decisive factors
   Pros/cons

5. **Why did you choose this marketing strategy?**
   Decisive factors
   Pros/cons

6. **How do you see the wider context in which your agricultural activities have developed?**
   a) What external influences are currently affecting your agricultural activities?

b) How do you react to changing environmental or market conditions?
c) Geology / Topography
d) Settlement structure (proximity to land / city)

7. **Who are the main actors relevant to your operation? And how are they relevant?**
   a) Input / Output
   b) What challenges arise from relationships with the main actors?
   c) Cooperations (formal / informal)

8. **What specific impacts does current agricultural policy have on your operation?**
   a) Pillar Direct payments
   b) Pillar Rural Development
   i. BIO Region Mühlviertel
   b. ÖPUL
   c) Specific examples, where is it beneficial / restrictive
   d) Are there specific aspects of your work where you wish to have more influence and control?
   e) What do you envision for agricultural policy? What role do you play in it?

9. **How do you see the prospects of your approach? How do you see the future?**
   a) Are you planning changes or adjustments to cope with future developments in agriculture?
   b) What changes would you like to see in the future?

10. **Then, I would like to thank you for your time. Is there anything else you would like to tell me? Or anyone/anything you would like to refer me to?**

11. **Other Topics (adapted from Lume):** Would you like to tell me about... on this farm?
    Leasing
    Seeds, seedlings, breeding material, progeny
    Fertilizers
    Animal feed
    Self-sufficiency with food
    Equipment/infrastructure
    Labor force
    Soil fertility
    Water availability
    Biodiversity

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