

# The Avatars of Green Consumption in Romania and Belarus: Risk Avoidance or Lifestyle Choice?

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**Abstract:** *The paper aims to describe the results of a research project on green consumption conducted in Bucharest, Romania, and Minsk, Belarus, in 2010 and 2011. A total of 30 structured interviews were carried out in the two cities. Using the theoretical framework of Beck's risk society concept and Inglehart's theory on the cultural value shift in advanced societies, the authors found that, regardless of their important political and economic differences, some of the individuals in the two Eastern European cities tend to display a level of risk awareness and risk avoidance behaviour similar to the risk society pattern. Rather than being the effect of a post-materialist value orientation associated with material wealth, the observed regional model of green consumption suggests a form of precautionary consumption that appears to be more than a passing fad. This finding has to be further researched in other countries of Eastern Europe, before any broader conclusions about risk society-related behaviour can be formulated.*

**Keywords:** green consumption; ecological values; lifestyle; risk society; risk avoidance.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** consum ecologic; valori ecologiste; stil de viață; societatea riscului; evitarea riscului.

## Introduction

This article explores the topic of green consumption in two former socialist countries in South-Eastern Europe. Little is known about the patterns of green food consumption, that is, consumption of food that is free or almost free of synthetic

inputs or additions, in countries such as Romania and Belarus. This research is the first of its kind in this field and its significance lies in the fact that it brings to light patterns of green consumption in the absence of a well-developed market for green products. The interest in green consumption is linked to the challenges of

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the emerging risk society, particularly to food-mediated risks in these two countries, rather than to any pure post-materialist concern with the quality of life. This research is exploratory and qualitative, and its importance is indicated by the innovative research questions and common methodology applied in the two countries.

Romania and Belarus currently represent different socio-political systems, with roots in the post-WWII past, but are nevertheless comparable, in terms of levels of economic development and lifestyle of the population. Because the previous, Soviet-era, level of well-being of the population in Belarus was relatively high, now this country is comparable in terms of level of well-being with Romania, which is a new and relatively poor member of the European Union (EU).<sup>1</sup> In terms of consumption patterns, we assume that Romania tends to follow the patterns of consumption found in the richer states of the Union, while Belarus is further removed from the European market. However, both countries lack a full-fledged market for biological foodstuffs similar to the one in Western Europe, even if anecdotal evidence suggests that among certain groups in the local population there is some interest in consuming such products.

The present paper takes as its point of departure the risk society literature. According to this literature, the contemporary world has become a "global risk society", so that people in each country are facing several threats and challenges to which they have to respond (Beck, 2001, 27). One such challenge is the global threat of consumerism, especially visible in post-industrial states, which resulted in an enormous growth of waste (Bauman, 1995; Ritzer, 2008). This challenge is experienced as a risk because it is augmented by an increased understanding of the complex relationships that link human health and well-being to human-induced changes in the ecosystem. Such an understanding finds

expression in "green" movements, environmentally friendly lifestyles and concerns about global risks (Yanitsky, 1998). According to the view of the Chemistry Nobel Prize laureate Lee, it is extremely important for the global community to realize that contemporary society as a whole has already reached the limits of the Earth's carrying capacity. Therefore, if the world follows this wasteful mode of existence, then the advent of global catastrophe is only a matter of time (Lee, 2011, 29). In order to avoid the global ecological crisis, humankind "has to revise its views about the globe, personality and the very idea of social progress". In other words, to avoid this crisis, humankind must make an ecological shift in the public consciousness (Grof et al., 1999, 5).

The assumption on which this article is based is that, regardless of the lower level of economic and political development, which separates Romania and Belarus from the most developed countries of Western Europe, the consumption of ecological products takes place, even if the formal market for green products is undeveloped. The onus to secure access to healthier or nutritious food is on an emerging category of responsible consumers, who tend to become concerned about the effects of food-mediated environmental contaminants on their and their families' health and are thus inclined to consume green products as risk avoidance strategies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in both countries, their respective populations are somewhat concerned about the consumption of food, which, according to common wisdom, should be as natural as possible. In general, natural food is seen as more healthy and often less harmful than "conventionally" processed products. In Romania, for example, the lists of allegedly dangerous food additives are frequently circulated in the media and the internet: a search for "E number lists" in Romanian yields approximately 25,000 hits. Headlines like

“Which foodstuffs contain the most dangerous Es [additives]” (Dragomir, 2011; Misnik, 2012), in Romanian and Belarusian newspapers alike, go on to provide the readers with a list of chemical additives to be avoided.

However, we also assume that only a small part of the population can afford the higher prices of *bio* or ecological foodstuffs. Regularly buying green food and other natural products is particularly challenging in the countries with an undeveloped market. A recent media article notes that while Romanian exports of ecological products topped 200 million Euros in 2011, its internal *bio* market stood at only 80 million. The problem is that Romania exports cheap raw materials and imports expensive processed goods, which limits the accessibility of ecological products on the Romanian market (Bucharest Herald, December 30, 2011). Therefore, the average consumer in Romania or Belarus must either economize on other consumer goods, in order to buy expensive natural food products, or simply avoid buying “green” and hope that “generic food is all right as well”. The third possibility, which will be explored in this paper, is to gain access to ecologically clean food that is not labelled as such, either through one’s own household production or by purchasing it from less expensive local farmers markets. This strategy is pursued by a number of consumers from Romania and Belarus and will be one of the focal points of the present article. In this article, our work follows the lead of previous work carried out in Western Europe, for example by Halkier (2001) and in Central Europe by Tivadar (2003). A second focal point will be the ways in which respondents feel that they can (or sometimes cannot) control their exposure to environmental risks through their food consumption practices.

The article aims to describe and analyse the findings of the first Belarusian – Romanian research on green consumption

that has been conducted in 2010-2011 by two groups of scholars from the two countries.<sup>2</sup> To the best of our knowledge, no previous comparative studies dedicated to green consumption have been carried out in the two countries up to now. Using the method of personal interviews, the authors collected information in the capital cities, Bucharest and Minsk, the largest urban centres in Romania and Belarus, respectively, on whether people engage in green consumption, how they make decisions on green consumption, and what is their motivation, their choices in food selection and beliefs related to green consumption. Additionally, the authors take into account previous surveys related to the ecological values of people in contemporary society. On the basis of empirical data, the authors conclude that people in both cities have much in common in their patterns of behaviour and attitudes aimed at avoiding risks, while still displaying some differences in motivation and income.

The following (second) section introduces survey data on food consumption patterns and preferences in Romania and Belarus, and considers an explanation for changes in these patterns and preferences, in terms of the postmaterialism value shift. Finding this explanation unsatisfactory, the following section outlines a more germane theoretical approach, namely, the risk society and individualization of risk perspectives. This section also addresses the main research question. The fourth section discusses the methodology. The fifth addresses the results of the research and their interpretation in terms of the research question. The final section of this article presents the conclusions and future areas of research.

## Green Consumption and Value Shifts in Post-Socialist Societies

The consumption of green (environmentally friendly) products has increased in Romania during the last few years, following a similar trend observed among European consumers. Comparative data which would also include Belarus are not available at this point, although some research in Belarus will be mentioned below. For this reason, this section will focus primarily on Europeans, in general, and Romanians, in particular. The *Special Eurobarometer* concerning the "Attitudes of European citizens towards the environment" (2008) shows that 75% of European respondents say they would be willing to buy environmentally friendly products, even if they were more expensive than "normal" products, while nearly a fifth are not willing to change their consumer habits in this respect. However, despite the high level of willingness to buy such environmentally friendly products, only about 15% of respondents have actually bought them in the month before the survey. In other words, when it comes to combining intentions with actual behaviour, the reasons for optimism are less clear-cut. On the other hand, the largest share, nearly 60%, say they are willing to turn to green consumption, but have not crossed the threshold separating intention and action (Special Eurobarometer 295, 2008, 27-28).

According to a country-specific *Green Barometer* (2008), which was carried out in Romania on a sample of 1,165 adult un-institutionalised individuals from all the urban areas of Romania, there is a distinct interest in consuming environmentally friendly products. As many as 67% of Romanian urban dwellers claim that they "avoid purchasing food that has been chemically treated or genetically modified" (Stănculescu and Marin, 2008, 18). When it

comes to actually purchasing green/ecological products, the percentage is lower: only 23% say they purchase mostly green products. In terms of the origin of food, the urban population consumes mostly food produced in Romania (69%) or in one's own household (21%). In contrast, only 7% claim that they consume mostly imported food.

As for Belarus, in 2011 there was a special survey in Minsk sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> The goal was to research the potential market for green products. Indirect evidence for interest in the issue of unprocessed food in the former Soviet space also comes from the *Greendex* research, which included Russia (National Geographic and GlobeScan, 2008). According to this study, 83% of the Russian respondents consume locally grown food at least once a week. In contrast, only 50% of American respondents consume such food on a weekly basis.

The reasons given for this pattern of consumption in Romania and Belarus help to introduce the argument of this paper. More exactly, 15%<sup>4</sup> of those who say they consume food produced in Romania give as their reason the fact that "such food is ecological" or "clean", "not chemically treated" or "not toxic" (Stănculescu and Marin, 2008, 19-20). The same reason is given by 7% of those who claim that they prefer food produced in their own households and by less than 1% of those who prefer imported food. Similar findings come from the Minsk study. According to its results, 15% of Minsk dwellers said they were concerned about chemical additives in food, while 9% were concerned with "cleanliness" (natural food), and 6% were against genetically modified food (Tishkevich, 2012, 18).<sup>5</sup> The concern with environmental risks mediated by food is modest, but worthy of further investigation in both countries, since it indicates an emerging pursuit of risk avoidance

strategies or what the literature calls “chemical avoidance” (MacKendrick, 2010).

The concern with the cleanliness and the non-chemical/non-toxic character of food among Romanians and Belarusians has been touched upon only in urban settings. In fact, those who are more likely to be preoccupied by this concern tend to represent a distinct group within the urban population, namely those who have higher education and live in the largest cities (Stănculescu and Marin, 2008, 5). In the *Green Barometer* research, they are identified as a more environmentally-inclined group, called the “eco-promoters” or “eco-committed”. The sociological interpretation of this finding has a direct bearing on the meaning attached to the problem of green consumption.

The most common approach to issues of environmental concern in general, and green consumption in particular, is to invoke the argument of value change. According to this argument, best synthesized in Inglehart’s post-materialism thesis, as the post-war (and post-socialist) generations become more secure in their economic welfare, their values shift from an emphasis on material security and well-being to a set of post-materialist values, centring on quality of life issues (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995). The preoccupation with the quality of life and, one may assume, with the quality of food, should be expected to occur in the most advanced industrial countries, where the level of material well-being attained by a large sector of the population is said to have satisfied the basic needs of adequate food and shelter. In fact, as Dunlap and York (2008) have pointed out, one of the empirical foci of Inglehart’s theory has been the emergence of environmentalist values. Inglehart assumed in his *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (1990) that environmental quality should be seen as a higher-order, quality-of-life value that

is largely irrelevant for poor people who are struggling to meet basic needs (Dunlap and York, 2008).

Indeed, the working assumption adopted by Haanpaa (2007) in researching the link between postmodern lifestyles and green consumption is that the latter tends to dominate in societies “where the level of affluence is high, and where individuals are no longer struggling with basic material needs, such as nutrition and basic security” (Haanpaa, 2007, 480). Others have taken post-materialist ideas a step further to argue that, among the more affluent groups in society, green consumption is a status symbol, without being necessarily linked to a concern for health issues (Hurth, 2010).

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from this literature is that green consumption, which takes care of both personal health, and the health of the environment, is likely to be observed in the countries where material needs have been adequately satisfied. The voluntary renunciation of material values and the embracing of voluntary simplicity (Etzioni, 2004) or of “small is beautiful” philosophies (Varma, 2003) are accessible to those who have the freedom to change their patterns of consumption.

The average consumer in Romania or Belarus could hardly be considered affluent, as the annual GDP per capita in both countries hovers around 50% of the EU-27 average. Moreover, recent research carried out in Romania on the quality of life of the population revealed that 65% of respondents believe that their income allows them to cover not more than their basic necessities (Mărginean et al., 2010).

However, a number of researchers do not look to the countries of Eastern Europe, and especially do not look to the poorer nations of Romania and Belarus, as a hub of postmaterialist values. Etzioni (2004) argues that consumerism is powerful and gaining in the former communist societies, largely following the “bigger is better”

mantra. Voicu and Voicu (2009) conclude that Romania is one of the most traditional societies in Europe. Given these considerations, how can one explain the observed appetite of some Romanians and Belarusians for green products?

### **Green Consumption and the Individualization of Risk: The Research Question**

This paper will focus on an alternative explanation of green consumption, one that draws on the risk society thesis theorized by Beck and Giddens. The risk society dates roughly from the Second World War, and is characterized by the fact that industrial society is confronted with uninsurable risks. These risks cover all domains of human social life, including health and nutrition (Scott and Marshall, 2009). As one of the originators of this theory, Beck (2006, 334) has repeatedly emphasized the spatial and temporal pervasiveness of risks, which “do not respect nation-state or any other borders.” More than three decades ago, researchers discovered pesticide residues in the tissues of Antarctic penguins (Lovelock, 1979, viii). More recently, researchers have been able to “trace toxins from streams to veins”, that is, measure the contaminant load that makes its way from the environment into human bodies (Fischer, 2006).

Even in those societies in which the state used to be powerful, the encroaching of risks into more and more spheres of social life, including the private homes and individual bodies of citizens, leaves the state largely impotent. Individuals cannot rely on state institutions, but are left to deal with “the anxiety associated with negotiating universal risks at the individual level” (MacKendrick, 2010, 128).

With regard to the health risks that originate in the environment and are

mediated by food consumption, individuals are compelled to act by the creeping risks whose ramifications reach deep into the textures of individual and family lives. From this perspective, green consumption can be viewed as the voluntary engagement in consumption practices that are deemed green or “environmentally friendly”, and, thus, exposes individuals and ecosystems to lower amounts of pollutants (Connolly and Prothero, 2008). The very new concept of “precautionary consumption” refers to a “sense of individual empowerment and control through acts of green consumption and chemical avoidance” (MacKendrick, 2010, 127). “Precautionary consumption”, thus, refers to the conscious limiting of harmful substances ingested through food, water or drinks, and personal care products (e.g., cosmetics). It is, in other words, an attitude toward one’s own health, the health of other people, and the health of the environment in general, and is also a practice performed on a regular basis.

Taking precautions with regard to one’s consumption practices would make little sense if one were not concerned with the problem of risk, and especially with that of the exposure to health risks engendered by everyday life. Hence, the link between perceived risks, on the one hand, and precautionary consumption, on the other, is fundamental for understanding green consumption practices. But how is one to deal with risks? Bauman (1996) points to the ethical paradox of postmodernity, in which the individual is faced with an enlarged space of opportunities, coupled with a corresponding set of responsibilities, but associated, at the same time, with a virtual lack of societal support for making choices.

These choices are not, however, a matter of luxury that individuals can wait to fulfil until they have covered their Maslowian basic needs. The media is replete with more or less veiled warnings that the consumption of different foodstuffs

carries the risks of negative health impacts, in the long term. As Halkier cogently put it, “environmental risks, closely related to the institutional dynamics of production, reproduction, consumption, infrastructure, technology and science, are being placed on the agenda at the kitchen table” (Halkier, 2001, 207). Risks are pervasive, and dealing with them tends to become a routine affair, when individuals are confronted with a variety of choices and with the realization that specific consequences are related to those choices.

The diversification of the food market after the fall of state socialism in Romania and Belarus has opened precisely this wide range of choices. Apart from the extremely poor groups in these two countries, comprising individuals who have a very limited range of choices to avoid starvation (Stănculescu and Berevoiescu, 2004), most of the population has a certain margin of choice. Compared to the Western European countries, this margin is relatively narrow for Romanian consumers, and still narrower for their Belarusian counterparts. In comparison with the EU countries, the virtual absence of a commercial market for green products in Belarus makes the supply of such products very limited. As a result, it is even more difficult to consume environmentally friendly food in the cities.

The purpose of this paper is to explore this margin of choice, in terms of precautionary consumption attitudes and practices. The guiding question is: how do environmentally-sensitive consumers in Romania and Belarus link risk exposure and the consumption of green products, both in their thinking and in their practice? The limited or even absent market for green products in the two countries makes this question even more relevant, as it probes into the redefinition of products from subsistence agriculture as potential sources of clean and environmentally friendly food. This perspective challenges the view that consuming products from

subsistence agriculture is a mere survival strategy employed by the citizens of Eastern Europe in their struggle with the deprivations of the post-socialist transition. Indeed, the predominant migratory flow from urban to rural areas, in the late 1990s, in Romania has been interpreted as a strategy employed by many former urbanites to engage in subsistence agriculture, which can afford them at least a modicum of material security (Sandu, 2005).<sup>6</sup> What this research seeks to show is that for a specific group of urban consumers, subsistence agriculture can play the role of supplier of ecologically clean products.

The next section will explain how the group of urban consumers was selected and what questions they were asked to answer. Given the pioneering character of this study, the research methodology aims to maximize the chance of finding precautionary consumption practices and values in Romania and Belarus, rather than striving for an image of the average consumption of green products in the two countries.

### **Research methodology: qualitative, in-depth research, using an interview-guide**

As the section on actual green consumption has indicated, the information available so far for Romania and Belarus is general and relatively vague. For Romania, we only know that a certain percentage of the urban population claims that it prefers green or environmentally friendly food that is produced in Romania or in one's own household. For Belarus, we similarly know that around 15% of Minsk dwellers are concerned about different ecological aspects of food consumption (Tishkevich, 2012, 18), while a majority of the urban population believe that the consumption of green products produced in Belarus is healthier than foreign products. For both

countries, it is known that many city dwellers have countryside summer houses (called “dachas”, in Belarus), or relatives and friends who grow vegetables and fruits for themselves. What we do not know – and what is very important to ascertain for both scientific and policy purposes – are the attitudes *and* practices of those who consume green products, as well as their specific reasons for consuming them. For this reason, we have devised an interview-guide to facilitate the collection of detailed information on the topics mentioned above. The questions are deliberately open-ended (with the exception of one of them), in order to facilitate detailed answers from the respondents. Using these types of questions, the researcher is able to record not only the specific answers of the respondents, but also the broader context in which they make specific statements.

The questions in the interview-guide are structured according to the following broad topics (the comprehensive list of questions included in the interview guide can be found in the appendix):

1. *Perception of environmentally-induced health risks.* This section aims to reveal if and to what extent respondents are concerned about possible environmentally-induced health risks. Without asking specifically about green consumption, these questions probe whether interviewees mention spontaneously “food”, “water” or other consumption items as possible sources of exposure to environmental (chemical) risks.

2. *Green consumption knowledge and attitudes.* These questions ask directly whether the respondents use mostly ecological products rather than conventional products. The assumption is that among the respondents, who form a specific group, the “eco-promoters” or “eco-followers”, as will be explained below, it is already well known what ecological products are.

3. *Ecological products obtained in your household.* This section is directly

relevant for Romania and Belarus, and it also potentially represents one of the most original contributions of this research project. It refers to the production of food for self-consumption in households. Of course, the ability of urban households to produce their own food is very limited. For this reason, there is a great opportunity to explore the active links between urban residents and rural dwellers, along which agricultural products find their way to the city within extended family or neighbourhood networks.

4. *Bought ecological products.* This section deals with the specifically urban behaviour of purchasing green or ecological products from specialty stores (“bio food” stores, “natural food” stores, etc.) or from the “bio” stands of supermarkets or other conventional stores.

5. The *home installations* section explores whether the green consumption pattern can be extended to other environmentally-friendly behaviours. For example, one question asks whether the respondent uses energy-efficient light bulbs, recycles paper, cans, and bottles, buys products made of recycled material or purchases glass bottled drinks etc. The answers will not be included in the analysis within the confines of this paper but are to be used in future research. The possible links between green consumption and environmentally friendly behaviour are an intriguing area for future exploration.

6. *Linking consumption to environmental risk prevention.* This section addresses most directly the hypothesized link between green consumption and precautionary consumption. Its key statement is that “some people think that consuming green/ecological products can help them mitigate exposures to environmental risks (pesticides, insecticides, food additives, etc.)”. After listening to this key statement, the respondent is asked to comment on it and point out whether he/she agrees with it or not.

7. The last section is meant to gather the *socio-demographic data* of the respondents.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and a half, and were voice recorded and transcribed by the interviewers. The aim of the questions was to elicit detailed responses that should capture not only the description of consumption practices, but also the motivations of the respondents for engaging in those practices.

### *The Selection of Respondents*

The *Green Barometer* has shown that, in the Romanian case, the consumption of green products is not uniformly distributed in the population. This consumption is most prevalent among the so-called “eco-promoters”, a segment of the population which has significantly altered its behaviour (civic participation and consumption patterns), with the explicit aim of protecting the environment (Stănculescu and Marin, 2008, 4). Methodologically, the eco-promoters have been identified on the basis of an index (ECOCOMP) composed of 16 indicators.<sup>7</sup> From a socio-demographic point of view, the eco-promoters tend to live in large cities (of over 100,000 people) and have university or college education. The eco-promoter status is not prevalent in any specific age or gender group, which means that it can be found among all age groups and within both genders.

In the case of Belarus, there is no known equivalent to the eco-promoters, although future research might well reveal the existence of such a group. If we take waste management behaviour in Minsk, for which research has been carried out as a proxy for ecological lifestyle and green consumption, then, like in Romania, the relevant factors to distinguish eco-

promoters are urban residence and university degree (Miafodzieva et al., 2010, 342). In Belarus, there is certainly interest in food that is produced locally, in non-commercial contexts. Here it is rather fashionable to have *dacha* and grow vegetables and fruits there. To do so is to have one of the features described as “belonging to the middle class”, in the public opinion. At the same time, food production on *dachas* is considered as “healthier” than consumption of similar food from the market or food stores. City dwellers without *dachas* usually have close ties with their countryside relatives who grow similar food for them. Usually ‘dacha’s issues’ are in the centre of everyday interests of the city dwellers (especially women) in the spring, summer and early autumn seasons.

For the purposes of our analysis, we selected 30 respondents with university or college education, evenly distributed between the capital cities of Bucharest, Romania and Minsk, Belarus. In socio-demographic terms, this group of respondents corresponds to the category of eco-promoters from the *Green Barometer* (2008). This choice was meant to maximize the chances of identifying green consumption practices and attitudes among Romanian and Belarusian consumers. The two genders and three age groups were selected to ensure a wider diversity of opinions (see Table 1). The inclusion of Romania and Belarus in this exploratory research served the same purpose: it offered a broader range of variation than would have been available if each country would have been considered separately. There are two additional assumptions that informed the selection of respondents.

First, there is a hypothetical statement that green consumption is more dependent on motivation, rather than strictly on the income of consumers. In Romania and Belarus, this motivation is related to the EU images of a proper lifestyle, and to the

general lifestyle images in post-communist Belarus and Romania. Therefore, the status of middle-class urban dwellers – who pay attention to their daily consumption practices – can also be an important factor influencing food consumption.

The second assumption informing this research – namely, that green consumption is adopted as a strategy of precautionary consumption – is dealt with by introducing another variable, which is the presence of small children in the household. Raising small children is expected to shift the consumption behaviour of their parents towards more ecologically clean products.

The actual selection of the respondents was based on convenience sampling, whereby the researchers approached and interviewed individuals from their networks of acquaintances. This ensured a

higher response rate among the participants and a fuller disclosure of personal information. In addition, given the novelty of this field of research in the two countries and the lack of specific hypotheses about variations in green consumption, apart from the higher probability that this will occur among educated, urban people, the use of a convenience sample appeared appropriate.

In summary, all these methodological choices – urban respondents, with a significant proportion of higher education and having small children – were aimed at increasing the chances of identifying green consumption patterns. Future research will be needed to ascertain to what extent the precautionary consumption of food extends beyond these selected groups into the wider population. The structure of the sample is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *Sample structure for respondents from Bucharest, Romania and Minsk, Belarus*

	Romania			Belarus		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Adults (no children)	3	3	6	4	3	7
Adults with children less than 14 years of age	3	4	7	2	4	6
Older adults or elderly over 55 (with no small children)	1	1	2	1	1	2
Total	7	8	15	7	8	15

The final sample on which the research is based will be described in more detail below. All respondents were university-educated, with the exception of two respondents from Belarus, who had special secondary education at the time of interview. With regard to declared income levels, these tend to be higher in the Romanian sample, compared to the Belarusian sample: in the first case, 10 respondents reported monthly incomes (per family member) of at least 400 euros, whereas in Belarus only three respondents indicated this income level. Conversely, those with incomes of less than 200 euros were more numerous in Belarus (six respondents) than in Romania (two inter-

viewees). The income level was a bit lower in Minsk; however, respondents with different income levels were included in both Romania and Belarus. Moreover, if we take into account that the purchasing power in Belarus is higher than in Romania, this difference can be considered smaller and less significant.

The interviews were conducted in the fall of 2010, in Bucharest, and in the fall of 2011, in Minsk. Using this research, we expect to be able to ascertain whether eco-promoters are indeed consumers of green products, and what are the possible issues related to this consumption. Another insight that we will gain are the reasons for consuming green products, both the general

reasons shared by all (or most) respondents, and the specific reason of each particular respondent. We expect to also be able to identify the sources of the products consumed (whether the source is one's own household, that of the extended family, or specialty shops). It is also important to add that green food industry is gradually emerging in Belarus: there is only one special small shop in Minsk, while in Bucharest there are plenty. Therefore, the sources of green products will likely vary between the two countries.

Another expected result investigates whether eco-promoters actually avoid chemically processed or genetically modified products in their consumptive behaviour. Finally, the key question of this research project – whether the interviewee agrees that green consumption reduces exposure to environmental risks – can be answered, it is hoped, in an unequivocal way. However, outstanding issues related to green consumption – such as barriers to this form of consumption – will be identified and can point to future areas of research.

## Results and Interpretation

### *Risk Awareness in Romania and Belarus: Qualitative Evidence*

Perhaps the most credible type of evidence generated by qualitative interviews is that which emerges in a spontaneous way in the course of directed discussions in which respondents mention sociologically-relevant pieces of information, without being asked explicitly about them. In the present analysis, when respondents refer to food-induced risks without being asked explicitly about food, the researcher can assume that he/she has tapped into a pre-existing cultural pattern, rather than into an *ad hoc* reaction to the research topic. In order to ensure

anonymity, respondents will only be identified by their socio-demographic characteristics.

### *Spontaneous references to risks for human health*

A clear illustration of spontaneous responses which suggest an active concern with risks was provided by a 50-year-old female respondent from Minsk. When asked about the reasons for consuming ecological products, she answered unhesitatingly: "In order to be healthy, of course". A younger female respondent from Minsk, B. (26 years old, married, but without kids) mentioned the Chernobyl disaster as a source of risk, and even of weakness: "we are so weak after the Chernobyl disaster". According to a survey conducted recently in Minsk on ecological issues, the majority of respondents connected their health problems with the Chernobyl accident (Titarenko, 2011, 88). Interestingly, even if no question mentioned this world-moving event during the interviews in Romania, three respondents from Bucharest referred to the Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986, as well. One of them was an infant at the time of the disaster, but she suggests that the effects of such events can become visible even a long time afterwards. Risk awareness seems to have taken the form of an inter-generational concern.

The respondents interviewed in Bucharest also made spontaneous references to other health-related sources of risks which are of concern to them – such as those ingested through food or water. When asked "what are the three most important environmentally-induced health risks facing people today", one middle-aged man with two infant children from Bucharest mentioned pesticides and growth hormones which are administered to chicken, and end up in the whole food system. Another interviewee from

Bucharest, a young mother in her early 30s, also thought that the use of growth hormones in animal feed is the most serious health-related risk. Another interviewee mentioned the high “toxicity of plants and, implicitly, that of foodstuffs” (female master’s student from Bucharest, in her mid-20s, no children). A fourth respondent answered this question by referring to the use of food additives and the increasing use of genetically modified organisms as health risks which may have long-term effects on individuals. This respondent, a female teaching assistant from Bucharest with no children, also indicated that she had read a report on hormonal changes occurring in individuals as a result of these practices.

In truth, these risks are not the only ones singled out by the respondents. They are part of a more complex configuration which includes other categories of risk as well. For example, an interviewee pointed to genetically modified food as a source of risks, alongside climatic changes and landfills (male teaching assistant from Bucharest, with no children). Another respondent offered a hierarchy of risks which, in her opinion, affect people living in Romania at present. The first are those linked to the greenhouse effect, the implications of which are not immediately visible, but will likely affect future generations as well. The second category of risks, in terms of importance, is generated by the consumption of ecologically impure food and water. The respondent also draws attention to several cases of nitrate pollution of groundwater in some areas of Romania. Finally, the third category of risks is related to the improper management of waste (middle-aged female from Bucharest with no children). Interestingly, an officer in his early 30s from Bucharest with no children makes explicit the link between waste management and health risks by claiming that the plastics which are discarded into waterways decompose and

are ingested by fish. Some of this fish is then consumed by humans and, thus, confronts individuals as a source of risk. Chemical body burdens ingested through food thus appear among the common concerns of people when they think about environmentally-induced health risks.

### ***Risks for the environment, risks for humans***

Paralleling to some extent the risk concerns of the respondents from Bucharest, the worries of interviewees from Minsk also focus on the risks that affect both their health and that of the surrounding environment. A 22-year-old mother from the capital city of Belarus says that additives are harmful for the soil and the atmosphere there. Similarly, a 30-year-old university-educated man from Minsk with no children says he read that ecological or green products “reduce environmental and soil pollution”. Despite the lack of advertising for green products in Belarus, knowledge of the positive effects of such food can be readily identified among the university-educated.

However, not all respondents are equally concerned about the health impact of pollution, for example, due to improper waste management. One respondent was concerned that individuals do not assume responsibility for environmental clean-up, for example, for the selective collection of waste, and the presence of waste is, as one may infer, a risk that people inflict upon themselves (retired female resident of Bucharest, with a doctoral degree in chemistry).

Respondents were also provided with a list of environmental problems and sources of pollution (e.g., climate change/greenhouse effect, loss of biodiversity, use of pesticides and other chemicals/ use of genetically modified seeds in agriculture, nuclear or industrial accidents, air

pollution, water pollution, pollution from household garbage disposal, land clearing, etc.), and were asked to identify those that affected their lives to the greatest extent. This question was meant to assess the consistency of the individuals' concerns regarding health-related risks stemming from the environment, understood in a broader sense.

Most respondents from Bucharest expressed or reiterated their apprehensions that nowadays chemical additives found in food or hormones given to animals destined for human consumption affect our health. Framed in this general way, this position was taken by a middle-aged woman with a small child and a middle-aged man with small children, both from Bucharest. A young adult male from Bucharest is mostly concerned about pesticides and other chemical substances used in agriculture, which enter our food: "The use of pesticides and [other] chemical substances in agriculture affects me to the greatest extent, through [my] daily food."

While not discussing health-related risks as such, a female research assistant, in her early 20s mentioned the 2010 alumina plant accident in Hungary which affected drinking water supplies and agricultural areas for a long time. This respondent identified globalization as a risk-enhancing mechanism: "regardless how far they seem, sooner or later they will reach you, too".

A young adult male from Minsk has a highly negative attitude with regard to GMOs. Another respondent, a male middle-aged resident of Minsk takes the argument one step further in relation to environmental risk, and argues that "foodstuffs with GMOs violate the balance of nature, and this can affect all of humanity dramatically." The male teaching assistant in his early 20s from Bucharest is concerned about genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which may be the basis of foodstuffs that have a lower nutritional value and thus can weaken one's

immunity. On the other hand, other respondents from Belarus are not at all concerned about GMOs: "There are many issues that are more important for life than GMOs." Despite having a higher level of education and income than other participants, this respondent, a 30-year-old unmarried male from Minsk, says that GMOs or calories are simply "not interesting for him". Even if no individual case can be used to challenge a theory, it is interesting to note how this respondent qualifies the post materialist values thesis. While he has knowledge of green products through reading and is in the highest income bracket, he has failed so far to develop the corresponding attitudes and behaviours related to a higher quality of life approach to consumption. He also mentioned that "he even did not see eco-food".

Pesticides are of significant concern to a young mother of an infant girl from Bucharest. She knows that Rachel Carson has demonstrated in her book *Silent Spring* that pesticides can lead to certain diseases. However, after having her urine tests done, the doctor exclaimed in surprise that her family seems to eat very healthily, because they do not have any nitrites in their urine sample.

Variations in concern do not seem to follow any particular age pattern. Young, middle-aged and older respondents all reported a preoccupation with the use of pesticides. For example, an elderly respondent from Bucharest thought that pesticides and the overuse of fertilizers have the greatest effect on our daily lives. A female interviewee from the same age group, who holds a doctoral degree in chemistry, also mentions pesticides, but claims that if they are used rationally, they can be useful. After all, she argues, pesticides have been synthesized for a specific reason, that is to get rid of specific diseases. However, there was also an isolated tendency of one middle-aged

pharmacist from Bucharest, who has two children in their teens, to deny that there might be negative environmental influences on their health. In the Minsk sample, a concern with the use of pesticides is evident only in the case of a young mother who thinks that there is no need for them.

Interviewees were asked if knowing the environmental risks which may have the greatest influence on their health is important to them. Most respondents from Bucharest answered this question positively, and also offered various reasons which made their reasoning more explicit. Responses ranged from general reasons, such as "I think this knowledge is important for anyone" (two female respondents with small children from Bucharest) to those closely attuned to the life circumstances of the respondent. For example, a retired schoolteacher from Bucharest says that "old people are rather powerless [in comparison to young people who are more vigorous] and I think that the elderly need a more balanced and ecological diet."

A young adult male with no children says that it is important for him to know such risks in order to be able to avoid them, or "at least limit my interaction with those environmental factors which are harmful for me." A similar answer emphasizing risk avoidance is given by a female master's student from Bucharest. Another young interviewee (female research assistant) expresses a more nuanced understanding of the desirability of being aware of health risks. She claims that if such risks were really great she would probably join a social movement aiming at reducing them. Knowing the risks to which one is exposed is a positive thing for her. But, she avers, being aware of risks can also have negative consequences, as this awareness would add one more source of stress to our already stressed lives. A mother of a 9-month-old girl at the time of the interview expresses a similar opinion, but claims that, even if ignorance may be useful sometimes, she

would not be able to act as if she were ignorant about these risks.

An officer in Bucharest in his early 30s also brings an interesting insight with regard to people's ability to be aware of risks. He claims that, even if individuals were uninterested in health risks, producers should be required, by law, to disclose the sources of pollution involved in their operations. People should be made aware of risks even if "healthy living" is not one of their top priorities.

A middle-aged resident of Bucharest with two children (the same respondent who answered the question about the existence of risks for himself in the negative) also claims that it is not important for him to know about risks because he would not be able to do anything about them. The retired chemist with the doctoral degree also tends to downplay the alarmist tone of some media accounts of risks.

These mild "denialist" points of view stand in contrast to most of the responses received from the interviewees in Minsk. But among these interviewees there are also positions which resemble the mild denialists from Bucharest, as well. A young male adult with no children from the Minsk sample does not consider GMOs foods to be a very important issue, and thinks that there "are much more important problems", such as financial problems. This person is not afraid of GMOs because he has read that there is no sufficient evidence of harm from these organisms.

When asked whether they suffer from any health condition that the respondents or their physicians might link to unfavourable environmental conditions, almost all respondents from Bucharest answered in the negative. Two partial exceptions were two young adult males with no children who mentioned stress, while one of them asked whether it could be considered a possible environmental condition. A young adult mother from Bucharest mentioned that the dermatitis which affects her

husband might be caused by the waters of an artificial lake in Bucharest on which he practices windsurfing. She underscores that this is her opinion, which has not been confirmed by any physician.

Older respondents tend to emphasize the chronic diseases which afflict them, such as hypertension. The retired school-teacher who mentioned the powerlessness of the elderly, points out that there are several sources which contribute to the poor health of people, such as the sun, fatty foods, but also psychological factors, such as stress. Overall, respondents in both Romania and Belarus are highly aware of risks, thus lending support to Beck's thesis that risk awareness has become pervasive in contemporary society. Contrary to his earlier position (Beck, 1992), risk awareness is not the exclusive trait of only the most industrialized societies. Again, leading some support to Beck's contention, risk perceptions do not appear to be clustered around certain age or income groups. One of the assumptions of this study is invalidated by the above findings in that respondents with small children do not appear to be significantly more concerned about risks than their counterparts with no children. However, there are some differences in terms of consumption practices, as will be explained below.

### ***Green Consumption Practices in Romania and Belarus***

Following the risk awareness and risk concern questions, the next set of items deals with knowledge and attitudes regarding green consumption. The first question asked whether the respondent, or his or her friends/relatives, use mostly ecological products, instead of conventional products. What the researchers meant by "ecological products" was food and personal care products (cosmetics, drugs, etc.) that are obtained from organic agriculture (free of

pesticides, fungicides, insecticides, chemical fertilizers, etc.) and/or have no chemical additives (preservatives, colorants, antioxidants, etc.). However, respondents were not provided with this operational definition, but were left to use the term "ecological products" as they saw fit, while being encouraged to provide enough details to make their understanding clear. This left some room for potential misunderstandings, but also allowed for a more unbiased picture of the individuals' representations of green consumption and its associated knowledge and practices.

In summary, the results for the respondents in Minsk and those in Bucharest are clear-cut with regard to the use of ecological products: 13 and 14 out of the 15 respondents in each city, respectively, have used or use products that they consider ecological or green.

The two major ways in which respondents understood green consumption were the "commercial view" and the "subsistence view". These two concepts were derived from the interview material, and they refer to different ways in which interviewees talked about their consumption practices. Commercial green products are those mentioned in the operational definition above, and they include all products explicitly labelled "bio" or "green" which can be found in supermarkets and/or in specialty "bio stores." The second category of green products to which respondents referred included (mostly) agricultural products from subsistence or small-scale agriculture. The latter are assumed to be largely free of chemical inputs (e.g., chemical fertilizers, insecticides or pesticides) not least because their producers are seen to be relatively poor and unable to afford these expensive synthetic inputs. However, unlike the commercial green products, there is no official guarantee that these products are entirely chemical-free. In some cases, the producers of these subsistence agricultural products are the

respondents' own relatives who live in the countryside, as in Romania. In other cases, those engaged in subsistence agriculture are the respondents themselves, as is mostly the case in Belarus. At the same time, "subsistence", in the sense used here, does not refer strictly to production for one's own consumption, but may include barter or the selling of agricultural produce at farmers' markets. A few illustrations will help clarify the way in which respondents talked about these two categories. Before detailing these explanations for Romania, it is important to say a few words about the situation of commercial green products in Belarus.

There is apparently no commercial market for green products in Belarus. Several respondents alluded to this fact. A young married male with no children from Minsk says that the market for green products works in Europe, but is not developed in Belarus. Another Minsk respondent illustrates an interesting relationship between the subsistence view and the commercial view in Belarus. She is a middle-aged mother with a middle level of self-declared income. After her family sold their farm (*dacha*), on which they had practiced subsistence agriculture, she was apparently left with no source of ecological or natural products. She worried greatly that the selling of her *dacha* meant that she had lost her source of green food: "Earlier, when we had a *dacha* we ate only fruits and vegetables from it, because they are good for health. Now it is not possible, therefore, we do not eat healthy food". Is there any commercial alternative open? Her comment leaves little doubt: "I frankly do not know where I can buy them!" This statement nicely illustrates the individualization of risks: people feel disoriented when they leave their secure life circumstances (the *dacha*, in this case) and are forced to face the uncertainties of where to get healthy food. Overall, there is little collective experience in Belarus and, to a lesser

extent, in Romania, to help them cope with uncertainties.

There are grounds to assume that the largest proportion of green products in Belarus comes from subsistence agriculture (*dachas*). It is interesting that a similar situation existed in the late Soviet period in Belarus, when *dachas* were not so common, but many people also tried to consume ecological products after the Chernobyl accident. Within the sample of 15 respondents in 2011, eight mentioned that they personally practice subsistence agriculture, even though they are residents of the capital city.

The subsistence view in Romania is illustrated by a young adult male with children who says that he uses mostly ecological products instead of conventional ones because, for his family, the consumption of green products means saving time and money: "We generally get our food from our parents who live in the countryside, which means that we spend less on agricultural products." A middle-aged woman with no children says that she consumes fruits and vegetables from her own garden, or those provided by acquaintances "about whom I know for sure that they don't use pesticides or other chemical substances." In both countries considered in the study, the produce resulting from subsistence agriculture is endorsed with a high degree of confidence. Two interviewees from Minsk made similar claims. One of them said that "I try to consume foods from our subsistence farming, if possible, [even if] the crop is not large, [it] is enough for the season" (middle-aged female, with children). The other respondent said that he "thinks that ecological products can only be obtained from subsistence farming" (middle-aged male, with no children).

In Romania, the commercial view of green consumption is illustrated by an interviewee who is in the highest income bracket and reports purchasing *bio*

cosmetic products from *Yves Rocher* (a French producer), as a strategy of chemical avoidance. At the same time, this respondent manifests some dissatisfaction with the limited selection of biological products on offer. A middle-aged resident of Bucharest with children concurs with this position: "The range [of ecological products] is much too small, for example you cannot find biological meat, I think that most meat has growth hormones."

Each of the two positions (commercial and subsistence) can be analysed in terms of positive or negative aspects, as well as from the point of view of availability and familiarity. The "subsistence view" is not always strictly tied to subsistence, but is sometimes valued positively for the perceived control over one's consumption which it offers. For example, an interviewee who is a young masters' student living with her parents in Bucharest. She claims that she wants to lead a "good quality life" and consume green products which reduce her exposure to the chemical additives found in conventional products. When asked whether she plans to continue this form of consumption in the future as well she answered that she even plans to expand it and "to be able to grow as many vegetables as possible in my own household". Although she lives in the large city of Bucharest and it is unclear whether she has the land required to grow her own vegetable garden, what is noteworthy is her positive valuation of this form of independent, small-scale agriculture. However, she values rather negatively the commercially available agricultural products. Her desire to have her own "home grown" vegetables is not shared by a young research assistant interviewee, who nevertheless consumes some of the fruits and vegetables produced by her parents' vegetable garden. However, these two interviewees seem to share a reserved scepticism about the proposition that one can really control all factors which would

ensure "ecological products in a perfect space". A young adult female respondent from Bucharest with no children claims that certified ecological products can be purchased only "abroad" [which usually means Western Europe and/or North America], rather than in Romania. She claims that "I don't really believe that it was checked that [producers] produce in an ecological way; I don't really trust anyone in Romania when they claim that it is truly *bio*."

The subsistence view of green consumption is not without its problems either, as the above quote illustrates. Other respondents offered additional explanations for why they think that even products acquired from direct producers (farmers or peasants) might not be as ecological as they should be. A young mother from Bucharest, for example, even thinks that "peasants certainly do not use natural fertilizers and menthe-based substances to get rid of bugs anymore. They surely use all kinds of [bad things] and [I am sure] that all we eat is not that natural anymore." A young married female without children from Belarus has a similar position, when she explains that, even regarding the products from her own subsistence farming (*dacha*), she still "doesn't know whether these products are ecological or not."

But respondents also have specific ways to ensure that they receive products as close to being natural as possible. One possibility is linked to the relationships of trust between consumers and producers, sometimes mediated by the respondents' relatives. For example, the young mother who suspects peasants (in general) of not using natural fertilizers, nevertheless receives fruits from her mother who lives in a town in a hilly region of Romania. She gets grapes, plums and apples, as well as cherries and sour cherries from trees which "grow by themselves, where nobody does a thing [to them]." The elderly female interviewee from Bucharest also consumes

dairy products (curd cheese and sour cream) from a farmer whom she knows well, and from whom she has bought these products for 40 years. Even if he (the farmer) does not always respect the standards of cleanliness, the respondent argues, at least his dairy products are not chemically processed. In a similar way, the young adult officer from Bucharest explains that he is trying to eat as healthily as possible: "I am looking for cheese or eggs from someone who produces in the countryside and look for [that someone] *via* my friends or relatives." In other words, the respondent suggests that he is looking for someone whom he can trust.

Another possibility to check the degree of naturalness (this term is used by the researchers, rather than the respondents themselves) of foodstuffs is by direct physical examination. For example, the young mother from Bucharest suggests that the little spots on the peel of fruits or the little worms inside show that the fruits are close to being natural. This strategy of "checking" the greenness of products can also be applied in the commercial view of green consumption. The young officer says that he uses certain guidelines when purchasing vegetables or dairy products. For example, vegetables (tomatoes or peppers) do not have to be large to be tasty – in addition to size (which has to be small), taste is another criterion. Dairy products which are closer to being green, from the respondent's point of view, have to meet another criterion, namely that their expiry date is as soon as possible. The following statement expresses his reasoning:

"Even with yoghurt, I don't buy from *Danone* [European producer of dairy products] because it has too many [additives], I buy from *Napolact* [local Romanian producer]. I prefer to buy milk which has a shorter expiry date. You look at the label and it says that it is good three or five months. I prefer one that expires in

two weeks, because I know that one is more natural" (young adult from Bucharest).

Another important dimension of green consumption, especially in relation to commercially available products, is that of control or lack of control. The similarities between some of the Romanian respondents and those from Belarus are noteworthy in this respect. When referring to produce purchased in stores, a 50-year-old mother from Minsk asks "who knows whether they are clean or stuffed with something?" In a similar way, five respondents from Romania raise the same issue of lack of control, one of them (a young adult female from Bucharest with no children) on three different occasions. One of these five respondents, a young mother from Bucharest says that she received a fish caught from the Olt river [major river in Romania]. She explains: "it was presented to me as being very ecological, because it is from the Olt river, but nobody controls what goes into this river."

With regard to the reasons given for consuming green products, respondents were provided at some point in the interview with three choices: health-related risks, family tradition, or green consumption being fashionable today. Most respondents (9 out of 15) indicated health concerns as a rationale for their green consumption habits. The response that most closely fits with the hypothesis of this research project was provided by a female respondent in her mid-20s from Bucharest who had no children and said that she thinks that if she consumes more green products she thereby reduces the chemical load from the other products that she consumes. A young adult with no children provided a more comprehensive response:

"It is for health reasons [that he consumes green products], for sure. This is my principle: if I want to live, I want to live healthily. I don't want to have problems with hospitals, everything with balance,

this is the secret. [...] If one would eat once a week, maybe [it would not be a problem]. But one eats three times a day, so it is obviously important what you ingest”.

These observations offer grounds to respond to the question from the title, in terms of a risk avoidance strategy, rather than a more unlikely lifestyle choice. While lifestyle may undoubtedly play a role in green consumption, what this article sought to emphasize is the important role of risk awareness and avoidance in green consumption in fairly traditional societies such as Romania and Belarus.

Two other respondents gave the protection of the environment as their reason for engaging in green consumption. For example, a young unmarried man from Bucharest says that his reason for consuming green products is to ensure better living conditions in the present and a better future for the generations to come. The second respondent mentioned both health reasons and reasons having to do with environmental protection, because, as she explained, “we have wrecked this planet long enough and we continue to wreck it” (middle-aged respondent with children from Bucharest).

Health reasons are not uniformly recognized as important by the respondents. One interviewee out of 15 said that it is habits learned in her family that make her consume ecological products, mostly from what we called above subsistence agriculture, although she does not identify with any of the categories given in the interview guide (health-related risks, family tradition or current fashion). Another respondent indicated financial reasons for choosing ecological products over those (more expensive) available in supermarkets. Finally, two respondents claimed that they do not use green products predominantly and, therefore, the question regarding their reasons does not apply to them.

## Conclusion

The interview material from Belarus and Romania has indicated, in a tentative way, that the problem of risk, of environmental risks which can have repercussions for human health, is likely to occur even in countries that are not among the most developed in Europe and are not marked by a postmaterial value orientation. Moreover, these countries seem to follow a similar regional pattern of green consumption, which is not typical for Western countries. People are concerned with risks, even if they have not reached the level of material comfort that is typical for the countries of Western Europe. The creeping and pervasive nature of risks, such as additives in food, GMOs, pesticides and other chemical or biological changes to what are generally perceived as “natural” foods, are valued in a negative way. Some respondents seem indifferent to such risks, but most are, indeed, concerned.

It is important to mention that, in the face of this set of circumstances, respondents from Romania and Belarus resort not only to the protection strategies available to Western citizens, that is purchasing biological or ecological products available on a commercial basis, but to an alternative source of food which is negligible in Western Europe, namely, subsistence agriculture (somewhat more common in Belarus, but also popular in Romania). This source provides them with opportunities for precautionary consumption, and is, at the same time, readily available for those citizens with lower levels of income and/or with a lifestyle that is more traditional than the Western one.

Among respondents from both cities, the presence of small children in the household did not make a difference in terms of attitudes with regard to green consumption. All respondents were concerned about “clean, safe food”; only very few

respondents expressed less concern on this matter. There were, however, some differences with regard to practices, as parents of young children tried to ensure that their infants benefit the most from green products. Future research would elucidate whether green consumption attitudes and risk avoidance concerns are also prevalent among non-urban populations in Romania and Belarus.

However, our results discovered some differences between the dwellers of the two capital cities. In Bucharest, green consumption might acquire the status of symbolic behaviour (a sign of middle class status), whereas in Belarus, green consumption among all the selected respondents (regardless of income) is a choice of risk avoidance. Another difference is of the opposite kind: not green consumption as such but rather growing one's own vegetables is a sign of middle-class status: more people in Minsk than in Bucharest grow vegetables and fruits in their *dachas*, because it is seen as a "typical" cultural feature for city dwellers in Belarus. The additional latent reason is also related to the lack of special food stores with green products in Minsk, unlike Bucharest.

Belarus is only in the very beginning of its way to develop a real market of green food similar to the one in the European Union.

Our results clearly suggest that the enlarging EU market stimulates the green market in Bucharest and indirectly motivates its citizens (even in a relatively poor member-state) to spend more on eco-food. Nevertheless, on the basis of our results, it is not possible to predict how the Minsk dwellers would behave under the conditions of availability of green food stores similar to those in Bucharest.

Our results do not provide an overall picture of the green consumption in the two countries or even in the two capital cities. Future research in this field is needed to ascertain whether a similar category of eco-promoters can be identified in Minsk and whether the green consumption behaviour is as prevalent among these eco-promoters in Minsk as it is among the eco-promoters in Bucharest. Our results revealed trends in the general attitudes among some population groups in the capital cities of two countries located on different sides of the EU borders, results which are important, given their novelty.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Central Statistical Office of the USSR stated, for example, that in 1980-1986 Belarusian SSR had the highest rate of growth industrial output, in comparison with other SSR: 323%, against 224% on average [SSSR... 1987: 94].
- <sup>2</sup> The authors express their thanks to other members of the two teams (Nataly Melnik and Darya Kalyuzina, from Belarus and Manuela Stănculescu, from Romania) who contributed to the development of the methods used by the authors and in the data collection process. Kevin Shultz has provided invaluable help in copy editing and improving the clarity of the text.
- <sup>3</sup> Green consumption is a new topic for the former Soviet countries. Thus, in a volume devoted to research on consumption recently

published in Russia, only one article touched on an issue of food consumption, focusing on gender aspects (Gromasheva, 2011).

- <sup>4</sup> This percentage (15%) is out of the total number of respondents to this question. It represents the top rationale given by those who indicated consuming food produced in Romania.
- <sup>5</sup> These numbers are a bit higher than the numbers in Romania, because only Minsk dwellers were questioned (not the whole of Belarus), and average income in Minsk is the highest in the country (*Tomorrow your country*, 2010).
- <sup>6</sup> However, it was not at all typical for Belarus, where urban population grew steadily without any flows back from the cities.

<sup>7</sup> Details can be found in the *Green Barometer* (Romanian version), namely: eight indicators point to consumption patterns (purchases drinks in glass bottles, not PET, collects garbage selectively, does not litter, purchases as often as possible products from recycled materials, avoids chemically treated food, uses textile rather

than plastic bags, uses efficient light bulbs, and unplugs electrical appliances when they are not in use). The other eight indicators concern civic participation (e.g., talks to friends about environmental problems, has been involved on environmental protection as a volunteer or has contributed financially to such environmentally friendly actions).

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## **Appendix: Interview guide for the research project on green consumption in Romania and Belarus**

### **Perception of environmentally-induced health risks**

Q1. What are the three most important environmentally-induced health risks facing people today?

Q2. Do you think that people have more reasons to worry about their health today than before 1990? Why or why not?

Q3. Which environmental problem/source of pollution (e.g. climate change / greenhouse effect, loss of biodiversity, use of pesticides and other chemicals/ use of genetically modified seeds in agriculture, nuclear or industrial accidents, air pollution, water pollution, pollution from household garbage disposal, land clearing, etc.)

- Affects your life to the greatest extent? For the ones affecting your life to the greatest extent, please explain how it affects your life.
- Is it important for you to know the environmental risks that have the greatest (potential) impact on your health?
- Do you suffer from any condition which you or your physician links to harmful environmental conditions? If yes, please explain.
- Are you aware of any adverse environmental conditions which have not affected your health so far but could do so in the future? If yes, please explain.

### **Green consumption knowledge and attitudes**

Q4. Do you or your friends/relatives use mostly ecological products instead of conventional products?

Q5. Which of the following describes better your motivation to consume ecological products? Please explain

- because of health-related risks
- 'it is a family tradition, we always used to consume ecological products'
- 'it is fashionable today'
- Other reason, which is....

Q6. Do you plan to continue this form of consumption in the future as well?

*The following series of questions is addressed to those respondents stating that they use ecological products and refer only to the use of ecological products, not of conventional products.*

### **Ecological products obtained in your household**

Q7. Are some of the foodstuffs consumed by you and your family produced in your own household/obtained from direct producers (farmers) or are all of them purchased from grocery stores/supermarkets?

Q8. If produced in your own household, do you use pesticides or other chemicals in production?

Q9. What sorts of foodstuffs produced in your household/obtained from farmers do you and your family consume (e.g. vegetables/fruit/cereal, meat products, dairy products)?

Q10. Who consumes these products mostly in your family (yourself, your children if they are less than 18 years of age, your parents etc.)?

### **Bought ecological products**

Q11. Do you purchase green/ecological products on a regular basis (once per week or at least 3 times per month)?

Q12. Do you avoid purchasing foodstuffs or cosmetics that have been chemically processed or genetically modified?

Q13. What sorts of green/ecological products do you and your family consume (e.g. vegetables/fruit/cereal, meat products, dairy products, cosmetics, clothing)?

Q14. Who consumes these products mostly in your family?

**Home installations**

Q15. Do you have water or air filters installed in your home?

Q16. If it is necessary, do you use any solutions against mould?

Q17. Do you use ecologic light bulbs/ recycle paper, cans, and bottles / buy products made of recycled material/ bottled drinks/ etc.

**Linking consumption to environmental risk prevention**

Q18. Some people think that consuming green/ecological products can help them mitigate exposures to environmental risks (pesticides, insecticides, food additives etc.). Do you agree with this point of view?

Q19. For whom is the mitigation of risks most important (children, adults, elderly, men or women etc.)? Why or why not?

Q20. Do your friends/relatives share your views about green consumption and the avoidance / mitigation of risks?

Q21. What do you think are the main barriers to green/ecological consumption? (level of prices, accessibility, clear identification/labelling of ecological products, etc.)

**Socio-demographic data:**

Gender: <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	Age <input type="checkbox"/> Younger than 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Between 21 and 25 <input type="checkbox"/> Between 26 and 35 <input type="checkbox"/> Between 36 and 55 <input type="checkbox"/> Between 56 and 65 <input type="checkbox"/> Older than 66
Current marital status <input type="checkbox"/> Unmarried <input type="checkbox"/> Married, without children <input type="checkbox"/> Married, with children	Residence <input type="checkbox"/> Urban, large cities <input type="checkbox"/> Urban, small cities
Living in the same household with: 1. Spouse 2. Children (please specify the age of each child) 3. Parents 4. Other family members (please specify)	Monthly Income level (income per household member) 1. Less than 100 Euros 2. Between 101 and 200 Euros 3. Between 201 and 400 Euros 4. Between 401 and 600 Euros 5. Over 601 Euros

Profession and occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you!

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