

# De/politicisation of the Public in the Czech GMO debate

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## Abstract

*The paper investigates politicisation and depoliticisation of the public in the GMO debate in the Czech republic. It follows performances of the three most important actors in the public sphere who are public administration, a scientists' civil association, and Greenpeace. Their performances are very different. I argue, however, that they have one common feature. If we take engagement in the public sphere, reasonability and autonomy as constitutive characteristics of a political actor, we can say that practices of all the stakeholders, their representations of the public, depoliticise ordinary citizens. For each of them subverts one of these characteristics. Finally, I suggest that in the Czech republic, we need more conflict between stakeholders for the political to emerge. This is a positive value of conflicts and confrontations in the field of GM technology.*

The case of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is one of those prominently related to an idea of raising civic engagement and direct public participation, or of a revitalisation of public accountability of decision making in the contemporary Europe. During the recent roughly ten years western European countries have experienced a number of public engaging events, ranging from formal procedures of participatory technology assessment to boycotts and demonstrations (Joly & Assouline 2001). However, what is a character of this engagement? Do various stakeholders approach and perform citizens as political actors, competent and autonomous? I study the situation in the Czech republic.<sup>1</sup> I look at ways how politicisation and depoliticisation of the public are generated, how they emerge as results of different activities, strategies, or their interactions. I do not think, however, that the approach is applicable to the Czech reality only. It attempts to capture more general features that might be present in different national contexts as well.

Let me first briefly outline the overall situation in the field of GMOs in the Czech republic. The development of the issue is in many respects similar to the one in western European countries. With certain delay, one can roughly observe an evolution described e.g. by Galloux, Prat and Stevers (1998), or Grabner et al. (2001). The history of GMOs in CR up to now can be divided into three periods. The first one dates back from the 1970s to 1996. It is a

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time of growing laboratory research, no legislation or state regulation and hardly any attention of the public. The second one can be delimited from 1996 to 2000. It is a period of incoming foreign biotech enterprises (like Monsanto), and activist practices and discourses (like Greenpeace), of first field trials and of pilot regulation. The third period started in 2000. It is characterised by more systematic EU-like legislation and regulation, and further development of biotech industry (co-operation with local research laboratories, continuing field trials). There are a few plants approved for field trials (e.g. Bt-corn, potato, flax), and one for placing on the market (Roundup Ready soy bean).

However, there are some differences between the Czech republic and western European countries. They are definitely not absolute. But they feature relatively more visibly in the Czech context. Let me mention the major three related to the point of this paper. First, the strongest incentive for an acceptance of the GMO legislation was the overall harmonisation of the Czech legislation with the EU framework. It has two interesting consequences. The first one is related to the very process of discussing and passing the GMO legislation. Concerned scientist did not like it as they regarded it too restrictive and overcautious. On the other hand, environmental activists, represented mainly by Greenpeace, also did not like it since they demanded more rigorous measures. However, because of the “import and imperative” character of the legislation, there was hardly any effective debate about its final shape. All raised objections could be easily eliminated by the argument that the Czech republic is obliged to accept the EU version of the legislation. The second consequence has to do with paragraphs of the laws on public participation in administrative procedures of GMOs authorisation. They define a possibility for civil associations with purpose of environment or consumers’ rights protection to participate. These associations can raise comments and objections that have to be tackled in public hearing. Greenpeace has already taken part three times. One can, however, see clearly from the available documentation that the responsible administrative bodies at the Ministry of Environment try to carry the public hearings out as formally as possible. The legislation was not constructed locally, it was accepted rather mechanically. And concerned officials, or members of regulatory bodies do not see the point, the meaning of public participation. In the present case, both the mentioned consequences are particularly striking since an important message of the EU legislation should be a new – more transparent and accountable - political style of decision making.

The second difference between the Czech and western European situation refers to the content of the public debate on GMOs. There is a considerable prevalence of risk discourse. Opponents, as well as proponents of agricultural biotechnology in the Czech republic limit the debate to “objective” risks related to human health and to the environment. Questions of possible partial interests of different stakeholders, political dimension of expertise, or ethical issues stay aside, or marginal.

Finally, the third difference - closely related to the two points outlined above - refers to an intensity of public debate. During the recent ten years, one can sometimes observe an increased public attention to the issue. However, it has never been a prominent public agenda. Or, we can say that an attention of media and the general public was always only secondary, never a driving force. We have already seen the double-headed major reason for this. The issue of GMOs is tackled as an expert one. First, there is a problem of acceptance and implementation of the EU-like legislation for legal experts. Second, there is a problem of competent regulation of use of GMOs for scientific professionals. And a weak public attention only supports – by a feedback effect – this formulation of the problem.

Let me now identify the three major actors in the public sphere in the GMO case. The first two are rather interconnected. These are the Ministry of Environment and its regulatory body, and a group of concerned scientists. In 1989 the Czech Committee for Plant Transgenesis was

established, a voluntary association of scientists in the area of transgenic plants. In the first period of its existence until 1996, the Committee was monitoring laboratory experiments with transgenic plants, but without any legal competence. Then, in the period of a pilot regulation of GMOs by the public administration between 1996-2000, it became an advisory body of the Ministry of Environment.

Simultaneously, a civil association Biotrin was established in 1996. It defines its main goal as dissemination of information on modern biotechnology. Its position is explicitly pro-biotech. Biotrin was founded by a group of scientists, primarily biologists in close relation to biotechnological research. Each of them was affiliated with either some university or the Academy of Sciences (e.g. Biotechnological Institute of Charles University, or Institute of Plant Molecular Biology of the Academy of Sciences). During the years, Biotrin launched quite professional and intensive (public) projects involving running a web page, organising lectures, seminars or press conferences, participating in activities of several international bodies, or co-producing the film “Genes of controversy” translated into 9 languages. The association cooperates closely with the Ministry of Environment, e.g. on preparations of the new legislation. A personal overlap between the Czech Committee for Plant Transgenesis and Biotrin was rather strong.

Finally, in 2001 the Czech Commission of Genetically Modified Organisms and Plants was set up by the new GMO legislation as an advisory body of the Ministry of Environment. The main tasks of the Commission is to assess applications for authorisation of GMOs and their users and to carry out inspections of work places and documentation kept by users. The Commission should represent various standpoints to GM technology. Its members are designated on the bases of suggestions of relevant administrative authorities, the Academy of Sciences, and civil associations. However, in many respects – personal and functional - the Commission is only a transformation of the former advisory body of the Ministry. The character of a scientists’ initiative remains inscribed effectively.

The third visible actor is Greenpeace representing anti-GMO position. It began to take interest in the issue in 1996. During the following years, Greenpeace launched various activities. They organise public demonstrations and petitions to the Minister of Environment, publish articles in mass media, or produce their own printed material, run a web page, comment on prepared legislation, or carry out polls among local foodstuff producers on their GMO policy. The position of Greenpeace can be characterised as a principal refusal of GM technology, in agriculture at least. This standpoint is reflected also in their vocabulary. For example, they use genetic “manipulation” instead of “modification”.

Thus, there are three main actors. Public administration (the Ministry of Environment and its advisory body, the Czech Commission of Genetically Modified Organisms and Plants), the scientists’ civil association Biotrin, and Greenpeace. Regardless the personal overlaps and interconnections, one can take these actors as representatives of three distinct approaches towards the general public. As performers of three distinct logics. What is interesting about them? Let us return to the issue of de/politicisation of the public evoked in the opening paragraph. In the following text I try to indicate and argue that however different those three approaches are, they have one common feature. They depoliticise ordinary citizens, the general public. What characteristics – however relative - built up a political actor? Let us think of three constitutive principles. Cognitive competency, autonomy, and presence in the public sphere. I suggest that each of the stakeholders’ approaches attacks one of the principles. Biotrin negates a possibility of cognitive competency of the public. Greenpeace subverts citizens’ autonomy. And public administration forces citizens out into the private sphere. Let me describe these practices in more details.

First, Biotrin. The public performance of Biotrin can be summed up by the word education. “Biotrin is a non-profit organisation formed by the academic community for dissemination of information on modern biotechnology,” states the self-definition on the Biotrin’s home page. The association claims to represent the only reasonable approach to the problem. They regularly label their opponents as irrational, ignorant, pseudo-religious, fundamentalist; and manipulating the public. For Biotrin, the general public consists of lay persons that cannot achieve the substantial knowledge, but can be, and have to be educated by scientists in order to form right opinions. The public never has resources to assess the technology itself, but it has to be educated in order to accept expert assessments. It is assumed that there is a one-way flow of information and experience, from scientists to the others (the public, or journalists). Example. In 2001, Biotrin prepared and handed over to journalists a “dictionary” of key concepts related to biotechnology. Or, it “reviews” monthly newspaper articles on its web pages, since sensational information is easily to be published in press, but corrective truth of scientists never appears.<sup>2</sup>

Second, public administration. The Ministry of Environment and the Czech Commission of Genetically Modified Organisms and Products execute the logic of delegation of power. The public consists of voters who delegated mandate to politicians, and secondarily to other professionals who are competent to protect consumers and the environment against objective risks of GMOs. It is their responsibility. On the other hand, they need an opportunity, a space to do it. The public has to let them act and become involved in a limited and constructive way only. This is a logic related to objective risks. However, citizens are also liberal subjects/consumers who have the right to choose freely and to satisfy their subjective preferences and idiosyncrasies. Labelling, which might be irrational from the point of view of contemporary science, is thus completely legitimate politically. Example. This double view is nicely expressed in the text of the chairman of the Czech Commission of Genetically Modified Organisms and Products. “Results of many trials have shown that transgenic plants and connected new technologies in agriculture are less harmful for the environment and for human health than classical technologies of agricultural production. In spite of this, according to the Act on GMOs... the products of transgenic plants will be labelled on the food market. It has to be understood as a respect for the wish of the people who do not want to eat the food prepared from transgenic plants. It is as legitimate as e.g. the wish of those who do not eat meat” (Ondřej undat.).

The Ministry of Environment, or other relevant administrative bodies do not mastermind any systematic persuasive campaign toward the general public. They carry out seminars for concerned expert public (e.g. users). And they simply publish what is prescribed by the law. It seems that they do not care so much (as Biotrin does) about citizens’ positive acceptance of the GMOs. They try to avoid scandals, conflicts and public discontent. But also, they try to avoid public debate about the issue and keep citizens in the private sphere.

Finally, Greenpeace. It engages in the practice of activation. It performs active citizens and consumers. On its web page “gen-network”, Greenpeace organises citizens’ petitions to the Minister of Environment, or instructs consumers to demand GMO free policy from supermarkets. However, this politics of active citizenry entails a tension. They often use the rhetoric of the right to choose. But, a few moments later, they perform consumers/citizens defending the GM free world. Example. “Consumer has the right to know whether he buys natural, or genetically modified foods in order to decide himself what foods he will eat,” says the leader of the genetic campaign of Greenpeace in the major Czech newspaper, commenting on the just published consumer’s guide (Genetická jídla... 2000). However, what is the title of

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<sup>2</sup> Research interview with a member of Biotrin, March 2002.

the guide? “Do you know what you eat, or how to avoid genetically manipulated foods”. Or, during the negotiations with supermarkets, Greenpeace re/presents the public that does not want GM food.

And there is yet another tension in the practise of Greenpeace. They present their objections as based on expert, or scientific arguments. But they often do not fulfil the basic standards of knowledgeable debate. Example. On the occasion of the publication of the Czech version of “GM before the court”<sup>3</sup> Greenpeace states: “This case enters the history and pushes the public debate about genetically manipulated foods from the level of ‘science versus emotions’ to a more sound level, when it turns out that scientists have serious doubts and ask questions that we cannot answer at this point.” However, at the end of the Word-formatted version of the published translation on their web pages they omit cited literature (which is included in PDF version). I would say it is a symptomatic failing. Greenpeace does not provide the public with relevant (negative) argumentation to form a starting point for the debate. Rather, it spreads ready-made negative attitudes towards agricultural biotechnology.

None of the discussed practices, it seems, approach citizens as capable to enter into the public dialogue and to express autonomous knowledgeable attitudes. As capable to enrich the debate. The public is either marginalised as essentially irrational, or forced out, with its subjective preferences, to the private sphere, or used for upholding rather pre-defined attitudes. If we take reasonability, engagement in public sphere and autonomy as constitutive characteristics of a political actor, citizens are deprived of their political identity. And simultaneously, the political of the issue and of the stakeholders’ positions is kept invisible.

It is nothing really surprising. Analysed activities are in fact practices of representation of the public, or of the interest of the public. The scientists’ association uses the framework of intellectual elitism. Public administration refers to representative democracy, Greenpeace to the idea of civil society. As we know representation is never innocent, it also performs what is represented. Public interest is being represented and re/defined simultaneously. However, as argued theoretically and empirically e.g. by Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe (2001) these representational practices can be less or more open, less or more dialogical. I suggest that they are rather less open and less dialogical in the Czech GMO case. It is true even for a civil society actor, Greenpeace, that should be, at least according to Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe (2001), the most probable provider of more flexible and dialogical representation of the public.

To conclude, I would like to insist on the role of conflict. In the Czech republic, at least, there is rather weak awareness of a strategic, or political character of every representation. We get easily caught by the (apolitical) truth. Making the political visible would, it seems to me, generate a pressure on various stakeholders to increase the quality of representation. But how to make the political visible? And by whom? I suggest that the political could enter the debate as an unintended consequence of more intensive and more public conflict. Which leads me to a formulation that may sound strange and provocative to EU colleges exhausted by the long-lasting controversy. But from this point of view, we need more, not less conflict about the GMOs in the Czech republic.

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<sup>3</sup> The book consists of scientists’ accounts made in connection to the trial with 28 Greenpeace activists accused of destroying an experimental field with *Bt-corn* in Britain in 1998. The accounts should justify the action of the activists.

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