Discursive aspects of GMO risk policy in Latvia

Zane Linde

University of Latvia, Centre for Bioethics and Biosafety, Faculty of Biology, Kronvalda Boulevard 4, Riga, LV-1010, Latvia

In Latvia the possibility of the application of biotechnology in agriculture and food production is low, but the public debate about genetically modified organisms (GMO) and their usage in agriculture and food production is one of the most intensive debates both on a societal and political level. Agricultural biotechnology in Latvia creates an active civil society, which in other cases is quite weak. Even the economic crisis did not evoke the same level of public mobility as with GMOs. For me, as a social scientist, it is fascinating to explore why GMOs are considered to be so important in Latvia and observe how the debate on GMOs is formed and how related practices are justified in the public sphere.

My conclusions are based on data collected within European Social Fund co-financed project "Capacity building for interdisciplinary biosafety research".[1] The case study is based on discourse analysis of political documents and printed and electronic media, and participant observation in conferences, seminars, public lectures, and presentations concerning GMOs which reflect the discourses of experts and lay people.

Based upon empirical data analysis, I argue that GMO risk policy in Latvia is not so much about how agricultural biotechnology effects the environment and public health, but rather how biotechnology endangers the relationship between nature and culture, the discourse of Latvianness, and the conception of food quality.

I will start with a short description of the situation in Latvia to better understand the context where the debate on GMOs occurs. The GMO discourse gained prominence when Latvia joined the European Union (EU) in 2004. Latvia had to define its position on GMO and adapt legislation in regards to this issue. Currently, GMO policy in Latvia is formed in a way that makes it almost impossible to start using biotechnology in agriculture and food production. Genetically modified plants are also impossible to cultivate in Latvia because the plants that are available are not suitable due to climatic and other conditions.

The 2007 Eurobarometer (2007, 65) shows that Latvia is 4th highest in GMO denial in the EU (75% of respondents) and 14% of respondents accept the application of GMOs in agriculture. Public involvement in the debate on GMOs is manifested through the activities of

environmental and agricultural NGOs. In addition, almost all local municipalities (91 out of 109) have declared themselves as GMO free. But this does not mean that everybody wants to be an organic farmer. Instead, organic farming is on the decline (in 2009 there were 4200 farms, and in 2010 there were approximately 3990 (Novicka 2010)). GMO products are also widely used in feed. The Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Agriculture stated that farmers are entrepreneurs and they have to be competitive and GMO feed serves as a guarantee.

There is also a clear separation between the different applications of GMOs in Latvia. There is no resistance towards the application of GMOs in medicine, for example, in the production of insulin, vaccines, and other therapies from genetically modified bacteria. There is almost no discussion about GMO usage in different spheres, for example, in the manufacturing industry.

Both supporters and opponents of the application of GMOs in agriculture are using scientific and pseudo-scientific (for example, esoteric) justifications for their arguments. Both sides argue about the effect on the environment and public health. The central concerns about GMOs are not about narrow technological and safety assessment and economic aspects, but how biotechnology challenges the Latvian understanding of the world. Based on empirical data, I have identified three discourses that explain why GMOs are considered to be so important in Latvia.

Symbolic pollution

In Latvian culture GMOs break the conceptual borders between nature and culture and biotechnology is seen as an intervention into the natural order. The danger of pollution associated with GMOs is at the symbolic level; the risk of pollution is understood as a crossing and merging together of different species that endanger identities: both eater and edibles.

Nature is seen as a separate reality or world where people cannot set foot. By doing this, nature becomes an agent that takes action, for example it sends bad weather, or it alienates man from nature and makes man less “human” and endangers the identity of man.

In the public debate it is common to make a distinction between organisms that are ‘naturally’ and ‘unnaturally’ created. The selection of plants is seen as a traditional agricultural practice. Selected plants are understood as natural and accepted, but plants created in a laboratory

are seen as unnatural and less valuable:

> [..] if selection in natural way select the best and then cultivate it, than genetics is straight intervention in genes with foreign genes. I do not want to become a shark whose genes often are used in process of genetic modification. (senta, reader's commentary in www.tvnet.lv, 28.01.2009)

This view of GMOs creates a break in the natural order and normality. It also points to the risk of pollution, which in this case is seen as crossing and merging together two different species. These perceptions justify the rejection of the application of agricultural biotechnology. The next section shows how this perspective is related to the discourse of Latvianness.

Discourse of Latvianness

The application of biotechnology in agriculture and food production is seen as a danger to the Latvian nation and to state sovereignty:

> In his [Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development Ministry Raimonds Vējonis] opinion GMO cultivation can be compared with some kind of slow occupation, when allowing it a little bit [..]Latvia will be dragged in to a swamp. (www.apollo.lv, 08.04.2009)

The EU, different international organizations, other nations, and ethnic communities are seen as 'strange ones', which endanger Latvia and Latvian identity with biotechnology. People from other countries are stereotypically seen as less "human", because they use genetically modified food. They are described as mutants or cyborgs:

> Look at those people [in diminutive] in the foreign countries, rolling around as snow balls, covered with fat. Here people look like people, at least for now. (Vārna, reader's commentary in www.tvnet.lv, 26.04.2009)

As Katrina Schwartz (2007) points out, in the case of Latvian nationalism we can speak about eco-nationalism or agricultural nationalism. Latvian nationalism is not related to political or other principles; instead it is linked to the land. She (2007, 206) writes that in the construction of the Latvian mentality, an especially important sign is nature and Latvians closeness to nature. The discourse of Latvianness is created with perceptions of the rural landscape and traditional agricultural practices which are seen as organic and unpolluted. The sense of Latvianness is created through the necessity for one's own piece of land or nook to farm. Through farming and a linkage with land we cultivate and maintain a sense of national identity. A threat to nature is associated with a threat to Latvianness. In this

discourse genetically modified food is seen as a threat to understanding nature as a component of national identity. At the societal and political level the principle of a self-subsistence economy is seen as a safety net, which is a part of maintaining the national identity.

The conception of food quality

The local sense of sovereignty is also related with the sovereignty of food. The consumption of food is associated with the symbolic perception of order. In Latvia, but also in other European countries, food is not just utilitarian, but is related to a sense of belonging to the national community and the ways in which a nation represents itself (Sassatelli & Scott 2001). In Latvia, for example, there is a movement to buy locally produced food. It is not always a national food, but we understand it in that way and value it as something of good quality. For example, we choose types of goods which express the Latvian culture or past, but in reality they are not produced locally. The Ministry of Health in its public health campaigns, states that vegetables and fruits from Latvia are healthier than food products from other countries. This perception of national belonging fits in well with postindustrial agricultural practices where in Latvia is still considered pre-industrial. In other words, industrial practices never developed in Latvia. It matches well with postindustrial practices characterized by small farms which are not very effective and therefore subsidized. These farms are rooted in a specific time, place, and tradition (for example, the tradition where to plant different kinds of seeds in different locations of a field). In contrast, agrobiotechnology stresses productivity which is the goal of industrial agriculture.

In Latvia prestigiousness and food quality are linked with locality which is also seen as clean. In contrast, French farmers reject genetically modified food because it is too ‘natural’: created in a sterile laboratory without any cultural traditions. In this case, the perception of food quality is not based on its cleanness (i.e. less chemicals), but based upon definite traditions of time, place, and cultivation (Heller 2006). In Latvia the dominate notion is that good quality food is also expensive and oriented toward the client, in the Latvian case this is organic food. The argument that biotechnology means less expensive and cleaner does not work because such a demand does not exist.

Conclusions

The debate on GMOs in Latvia is not so much about a narrow scientific evaluation of technological safety, economic benefits or state development. It is about the Latvian understanding of a world which is composed of opinions and perceptions of nature, culture,

food, nation, identity, and other essential social aspects. Even the small possibility of the use of biotechnology in agriculture and food production challenges and endangers these concepts.

In this paper, I have demonstrated how agrobiotechnology endangers the relationship between nature and culture, the discourse of Latvianness, and the conception of food quality. The non-acceptance of the application of biotechnology in agriculture and food production is related to the risk of pollution at a symbolic level, which is understood as a process that crosses and merges together different species. In this view GMOs are seen as unnatural and dangerous. The application of biotechnology in agriculture and food production is also seen as a danger to the Latvian nation and state sovereignty. This perspective of endangerment is related to nationalism, in which the central aspect is Latvian link to land and closeness to nature. Genetically modified food and biotechnology are seen as threats to understanding nature as a component of national identity. Different international organizations, nations, and ethnic communities are seen as 'strange ones', which endanger Latvian identity with biotechnology.

Food and its production practices are also related to a sense of belonging to the national community. Genetically modified food is rejected because it does not fit in with the perception of food quality and quality of agriculture practices. In Latvia the demand is for food, which is expensive, local, and oriented toward the client. This food is imagined as being healthier and of higher quality. Further, the conception of quality of agriculture practices reflect postindustrial (in the case of Latvia – pre-industrial) practices, which are rooted in a definite time, place, and tradition.

Notes

1. For more information about the project see link: http://www.biodrosiba.lu.lv/eng/

References

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