
Politicising Coexistence between GM and Non-GM Crops

Tereza Stöckelová

Abstract

This paper analyses a controversy over coexistence between different modes of agriculture in the EU, based on genetically modified (GM) and non-GM crops. In the first part, different framings, interpretations and enactments of coexistence are introduced, namely those of the European Commission (EC), environmentalist NGOs and European regions. Due to substantially different claims and expectations of the actors, the concept of coexistence as proposed by the EC in 2003 is no solution to the public unease with GMOs in Europe; on the contrary, it became itself a controversial issue. In the second part, attention is focused on the ways in which European regions appropriate the issue. Controversy over coexistence does not concern solely the agricultural space but also a political geography of Europe: through their positioning in the controversy, the regions aim at strengthening their identity and political power, and legitimizing regional knowledge.

There are three focal points that are keys to the European controversy over genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which has culminated in recent years: traceability and labelling, coexistence of GM agriculture with conventional and organic agriculture, and field trials with GMOs. The three points are not unique to the GMO case but represent, articulate and extend more general tendencies or tensions in contemporary European society. Negotiations over traceability and labelling have closely linked with enacting political consumerism and extending public accountability. In the controversy over coexistence, the political geography of Europe is at stake, involving relations between the European Commission (EC), member states and regions, the distribution of powers, competencies and responsibilities among them, and the constitution of public spaces at the European and regional levels. In the controversy over field trials, the orientation of contemporary research, its public accountability and

the independence of research on industrial and other interests are at issue. This paper explores the issue of coexistence.

Interpreting coexistence

One of the most significant concerns related to GMOs is genetic pollution. Expert reports as well as the experience of countries which have been growing GM crops for several years show that genetic contamination of non-GM crops with modified genetic material can never be completely prevented (cf. e.g. Joint Research Centre of the EC 2002). Genetic contamination is at the centre of the coexistence debate.

In July 2003, the EC published *Recommendation on guidelines for the development of national strategies and best practices to ensure the co-existence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming* (EC 2003a). Ensuring coexistence was defined as one of the key conditions for the lifting of the six-year European moratorium (1998–2004) on authorisations of new GMOs. The Environmental Council initially declared this moratorium in reaction to public opposition to GMOs and discontent with the regulation of the technology in the EU. The published *Recommendation*, however, generated dissent and doubts rather than satisfying those who criticise the introduction of GM agriculture in Europe, including the European Parliament (EP) (cf. EP, Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development 2003). How are we to understand this dissatisfaction? In the following sections we will focus on the EC document, on the social, political and technical conditions inscribed into it, and we will explore them in contrast with assumptions of the opponents of the EC's concept of coexistence, which are visible not only in textual reactions but also in the launch of new campaigns and activities. The coalition of opponents is diverse and varies from country to country. However, there are some key actors: environmentalist NGOs working in the member states or at the European level: Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace; associations of smaller, often organic farmers (IFOAM EU, Confederation paysanne (F) and Confederazione nazionale Coldiretti (I)); and representatives of some European regions (Upper Austria, Tuscany and Wales are especially active regions).

A few members of the EP can also be counted among the fierce critics (cf. EP, Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development 2003).

For the EC, the starting point of the coexistence debate is the introduction of GMOs into Europe. The question is how to regulate introduction in such a way as to minimise interference with and limits on other types of agricultural production. New agricultural biotechnologies will extend consumer choice to GM foods, and should not reduce the choice of foods produced in other ways. According to the EC press release (EC 2003b): 'The issue of co-existence refers to the ability of farmers to provide consumers with a choice between conventional, organic and GM products that comply with European labelling and purity standards.' The EC considers these three types of agricultural production as substantially commensurable and non-exclusive under specified conditions. These conditions involve not only agricultural procedures suggested in the *Recommendation* (such as isolation distances between GM and non-GM crops or buffer zones) to prevent contamination, but also new labelling and purity standards, which define specific limits for the contamination of conventional and organic crops by GM material. The regulations 1829/2003 and 1830/2003 of the European Parliament and the Council establish a threshold of 0.9% for the labelling of products produced from GMOs. There is no duty to label products falling below this threshold if the GMO concerned is authorised in the EU and its presence is adventitious or technically unavoidable.¹ The threshold is adjusted to the level of contamination that can be realistically achieved in Europe after the introduction of GM crops without major costly changes in current agricultural practices. The *Recommendation* defines them as maximum values, but *de facto* also as minimum values. 'Measures for co-existence should be efficient and cost-effective, and proportionate. They shall not go beyond what is necessary in order to ensure that adventitious traces of GMOs stay below the tolerance thresholds set out in Community legislation. They should avoid any unnecessary burden for farmers, seed producers, co-operatives and other actors associated with any production type' (EC 2003a, 9).

At the other end of the spectrum, those who criticise the introduction of GM agriculture start from 'zero tolerance' of genetic contamination, particularly with respect to organic farming. The key question here is

whether coexistence is even possible. Their answer to this is that it is not. Growing GM crops in Europe would not extend consumer choice but, on the contrary, destroy it. The ability to choose 'genuine' GM-free foods would become impossible. The critical coalition refuses any thresholds for seed purity (the threshold proposed by the EC is 0.3%) and considers the threshold of 0.9% set for the labelling of raw material and foods, to be too high (cf. e.g. *Civil society urges ...* 2004).

Another substantial topic of controversy is related to the level of GMO regulation in the EU. The cultivation and introduction of GMOs on the market are authorised by the Council of Environment Ministers. Council decisions are binding for the entire EU. Article 19 of *Directive 2001/18/EU* establishes the right of member states to ban authorised GMOs on their territory to the extent that the state can justify the ban because of specific environmental or health-related risks. The procedure of banning is defined as an exception that must be justified by scientific evidence; the European single market is the rule. However, the problem of coexistence and liability for possible genetic contamination is to be solved by member states. 'The conditions under which European farmers work are extremely diverse. Farm and field sizes, production systems, crop rotations and cropping patterns, as well as natural conditions, vary enormously across Europe. This variability needs to be taken into account when devising, implementing, monitoring and co-ordinating co-existence measures. The measures that are applied must be specific to the farm structures, farming systems, cropping patterns and natural conditions in a region' (EC 2003a). In the view of the EC, Europe is homogeneous enough for blanket authorisation of GM crops for cultivation, but too heterogeneous for binding coexistence and liability rules to be set at the European level.

Critics of GMO introduction take precisely the opposite position. They appeal for a European legal framework for coexistence and liability (cf. e.g. Friends of the Earth Europe, undated), and they support and have stimulated initiatives which make a rule from the exception of the national bans.

The position of the EC is evolving in this regard. In 2005, the new European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mariann

Fischer Boel, announced the intention to create a European legal framework for coexistence. How should we understand this? On the one hand, it seems that in making this move she will accommodate NGOs demanding an obligatory European framework. On the other hand, we have to consider the context of developments in different member states. Germany and Italy passed coexistence norms that are very unfavourable to the introduction of GM crops. In Italy in particular, the law shifts the rights and obligations related to coexistence (as well as that of declaring GM-free zones) to the regions, which for the most part have banned the cultivation of GM crops on principle. Establishing the legal regime of coexistence at the European level could thus become a means of preventing further norms of this kind, and of invalidating those already passed.

The final key feature of the *Recommendation* is the strict separation of economic concerns from environmental and health-related risks. While the risks are dealt with in the framework of *Directive 2001/18/EC* and *Regulation 1829/2003*, the *Recommendation* and the concept of coexistence are related exclusively to potential conflicts with the economic interests of farmers. The primary concern is economic losses which could result from contamination.

Those who criticise the concept of coexistence as proposed by the EC link up the different concerns about coexistence. They persistently raise questions about the safety of GM crops with respect to human health and the environment, and at the same time advocate the cultural and agricultural traditions of the regions. As we will see in the analysis later, the political sovereignty of the regions is also a key issue. Economic concerns are crucial, but they are not the only concerns related to the introduction of GM crops and the issue of coexistence in Europe.

We can summarise the positions of the two sides in the following table. From the EC's perspective, coexistence becomes a tool for introducing GM-based agriculture into Europe. Its critics try, on the contrary, to re-define and rework coexistence and to propose principles and measures for preventing the introduction of GM crops into Europe, first of all by means of the concept of 'GMO-free zones'.

Table 1.

<i>European Commission's coexistence</i>	<i>and its critics</i>
starting point: introduction of GM agriculture	starting point: zero tolerance of contamination
key question: what labelling and seed purity standards? (0.9% for labelling)	key question: is coexistence possible at all? (coexistence impossible)
coexistence ensuring consumer choice (of GM foods)	coexistence destroying consumer choice (of genuine non-GM foods)
claiming coexistence and liability measures at national or regional levels (while authorisation and standards at European level)	claiming coexistence and liability measures at the European level (while <i>de facto</i> performing national and regional authorisation)
thresholds as maximum and at the same time minimum contamination levels	thresholds rejected or at the detection level
coexistence related to economic aspects only, not health and environmental or cultural ones (purification)	coexistence related to diversity of concerns, including environmental and health or cultural ones (mixing)
reasoning: why should GM agriculture be excluded from Europe?	reasoning: why should GM agriculture be introduced into Europe?

Political geographies of Europe

In recent years many European regions, towns and villages have declared themselves to be GM-free. This has been happening in defiance of the increase in pressure from the EC that GM crops be introduced into European agriculture. The legal status of GM-free declarations has not been resolved. Support by the governments of the member states varies from state to state. In the coming years, the strength of these declarations will be applied and tested in struggles for factual cultivation of GM crops. The remarkable feature of the struggles, controversies and tensions is that they do not relate only to physical space and farmland but also to the

political geography of Europe, to the distribution of power and knowledge across Europe. The geography does not have a stable shape that would precede the controversies. Rather, it is being redefined, weakened or strengthened in and through them.

At stake in these controversies is what the political geography of Europe will look like in the future rather than what it 'really' is at the moment. In an article in the *Guardian*, Mayer and Grove-White (2005) suggest a perspective in which the GMO issue is not being tackled in the framework of firmly established institutions, competencies and trustworthiness, but rather that it is an issue through which these institutions and their qualities are tested and by which they could and should be changed. The article addresses the behaviour of the EC in the controversy with the US in the World Trade Organisation, in which the US, Canada and Argentina are challenging the European moratorium on GMOs and the regulatory model requiring traceability and labelling on the grounds that they represent trade barriers.

The commission is playing a dangerous game. Member states and their populations are divided even on whether the two varieties of GM maize recently approved satisfy the EU's own regulatory criteria. However, the commission appears to have decided that satisfying the US is more important than respecting the continued concern among the people and governments of member states. It is a course of action that could have reverberations for the European project as a whole.

(...) It is not only Europe's institutions that are being tested by the GM dispute. The already tattered credibility of the WTO itself is also at stake (Mayer & Grove-White 2005).

The authors present (and perform) the GMO controversy as a strong test case for the European project. Inspired by their perspective, we will try to study the controversy as a case of political geographies in the making. Among the many actors involved in the case we will now focus in this perspective on European regions, particularly on the Network of GMO-Free Regions.

Enacting regions through opposing GM crops

In November 2003, ten European regions (Aquitaine-F, Basque Country-E, Limousin-F, the Marches-I, Salzburg-A, Schleswig-Holstein-D, Thrace-GR, Tuscany-I, Upper Austria-A and Wales-UK) asked the EC to recognise the right of regions to declare themselves GM-free.² Two more regions (Burgenland-A and Highlands-UK) joined the ten regions during the conference in Linz on April 28, 2004, and together they established the *European Network of GMO-Free Regions*. This initiative was also supported by the Assembly of European Regions,³ which took part in the conference.

On September 14, 2004, the Assembly of European Regions and Friends of the Earth Europe launched a common long-term campaign to protect traditional crops and products from the consequences of the introduction of new biotechnologies.

On January 22, 2005, the 'European Conference on GMO-free Regions, Biodiversity and Rural Development' took place in Berlin, which resulted in a petition being submitted to the EC and the *Berlin Manifesto*.

Finally, on February 4, 2005, the *European Network of GMO-free Regions* met representatives of local authorities in Florence and signed the *Charter of the regions and local authorities of Europe on the subject of coexistence of genetically modified crops with traditional and organic farming* (2005). The Network now has 20 members.⁴

We will now read and later analyse a few quotations characterising these initiatives (bold notions will be addressed in the analysis).

* *The European regions say NO to genetically modified organisms* (press release of the Assembly of European Regions, April 29, 2004):

'Regional representatives, scientists and environmental associations present in Linz affirmed, rightly, that the approval of the introduction of genetically modified crops without testing the long-term effect on environment and human health is irresponsible. However, nothing seems to be able to stop the approval for introduction of BT11 corn by the European Commission anymore. A large movement from **the European regions and their citizens** is thus necessary, to obtain that the current system at EU level become more democratic, more transparent and more respectful of

the citizens' will', Mrs. De Rose (Executive Secretary for the AER Committee 'Regional Development', T. S.) concluded.

The AER supports with much conviction these regions' initiative and is committed to spread it to all European regions. It will encourage **the development of a strategic alliance between European regions, scientific experts and Non Governmental Organisations.**

** The assembly of European regions calls upon the EC to stop flooding the common market with new GM-seeds* (press release of the Assembly of European Regions, September 7, 2004):

'(...) nearly two thousand regional and local authorities across Europe have declared themselves GMO-free areas, **challenging the European law on the single market.** By their decisions, supported by consumers, traditional producers and environmental associations, they want **to confront the risks** of contamination by GMOs and to protect their territory's traditional agriculture as well as products of designated origin.'

** Berlin Manifesto for GMO-free Regions and Biodiversity in Europe* (2005) elaborates, e.g., on the following points:

'Our choice. We all share the fundamental human right to choose what we eat. Choices about the use of reproductive material in a common environment cannot be made individually, as they affect all people sharing these commons. Decisions about the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the shape of our landscape should **be made democratically in the regions and not be imposed by individual farmers, bureaucrats or companies.** Decisions can be wrong and thus should be open for change and reversal.

Our agricultural diversity. Agri-Culture is an important part of **our regional way of life.** Socio-economic and cultural impacts must be taken into account when introducing agro-technologies such as GMO. (...) Where the right to farm without GMOs and without undue changes to the local agricultural practice cannot be guaranteed, the introduction of GMOs must be prevented.

Our co-existence. (...) **The level of protection and standards of co-existence, including their costs, must be assessed and decided upon**

locally and regionally. Fair and sustainable coexistence must prevail between neighbours and economic partners. It must not be forced upon their traditional practices and future development.

Our Europe. **The diversity of regions shapes the identity of Europe.** In a global economy we do need common European standards on food safety, transparency, liability, environmental and nature protection and market access. They should be designed **to serve and not to suppress the local and regional self-determination of the people of Europe.** We will defend these rights and duties and the beauties and joys of our regions throughout Europe.'

** Twenty European 'GMO-free' regions sign charter to preserve conventional and organic farming on their territory and call on European institutions to legislate on coexistence between crops* (press release, January 7, 2004), quoting Claudio Martini, president of the region of Tuscany:

'In Europe, there must be room for a model of **agriculture which is based on a genuine identity, cultural characteristics**, high-quality GMO-free products.'

The selected quotations address several key themes. The first theme relates to the political positioning of the regions. We read about regions and their citizens, democratic decision-making at the regional level in contradiction to decisions imposed by actors from other levels, and about local and regional self-determination. According to *Le Monde*, the signing of the Charter 'constitutes a significant development in the GMO controversy: it witnesses that the opposition does not consist only of environmental NGOs, farmers and consumers, but also of elected authorities who have the means, in various degrees, to exercise power' (Le Monde 2005). We should not overlook the bi-directional aspect of support: regional politicians adopt the GMO issue as their own, support the struggles of environmentalist NGOs and thus provide the opposition with legitimacy in terms of a representative democracy, and the politicians are in turn strengthened by the GMO case when the public is mobilised against GMOs. Their positioning allies them with other actors. GMOs are an issue *through* which the concept of regional citizenship and regional public can be strengthened. Where the European public is still a vague

actor, and member states' publics often see indecisive and ambiguous actions by their governments, regions offer a more effective principle of citizenship. This is why the *Le Monde* article about significant development is correct. The presence of politicians on the side of those opposing GM is not new, as there have been member state politicians at the national level supporting policies resisting the introduction of GMOs into the EU since the mid-1990s; however, rarely has this been a manifestation of an active anti-GMO stance, but rather a half-hearted reaction to public pressure. Regional politicians now relate to the case differently, in an openly positive way. After all, it is much more acceptable for a region to associate itself with (cultural and localising) tradition than it is for a nation state; the nation state is closely linked to the modernist idea of (technological and universalising) progress.

The second, closely related theme addresses the relations between regions and the EU. The rhetoric is confrontational. Regions 'challenge the law on the European single market', they 'confront risks' arising from decisions of the EC, they call for standards which do not serve to suppress regional self-determination. The European Union, which has promoted regionalisation in a decisive way especially through structural funds (Boyle 2000), has also strengthened the possibilities of regional resistance. Member states do not play the role of mediators. There is both conflict and consensus between the EU and the regions, which compared to the member states, are sufficiently homogenous internally (at least this is the argument) to persuasively represent and defend the interests of their citizens in relation to the EU.

Another theme is the weaving together of the motives of regional and local economies, cultures, environments and regional ways of life: a genuine identity. 'The diversity of regions shapes the identity of Europe.' Many regions are now reinventing their (European) identity, and GM agriculture is an exceptionally convenient issue for articulating that identity. The issue works in polarities of tradition *vs.* homelessness, quality *vs.* quantity, heterogeneity *vs.* homogenisation, (local) origin *vs.* (global) patent and, in the context of the current controversy, also positing democratic decision-making *vs.* the unaccountable decisions of bureaucrats and economic pressures as another polarising issue. Resistance against

GMOs arises not only from regional identities, but also contributes to its reinvention and articulation.

The last theme concerns the strategic coalitions between regions, scientific experts and NGOs. Each aspires to convey a specific legitimacy to decision-making and actions: regions provide and guarantee democratic representation; scientists provide expertise; and NGOs ensure public participation. The potential is there to create a strong coalition. But this also poses a challenge for the identity of each side, as well as for the issue of GM agriculture itself. In what framing of the controversy may it result? GMOs as a vehicle for the discourse of purity, in partnership, for example, with anti-immigration policy?⁵ Or GMOs as an opportunity to reflect on the reasons and goals of regionalisation? How might this alliance change the identities of the actors involved? Will environmentalist NGOs become more culturally sensitive? Will the regions become more open through this alliance, less ethno-regionalist? Will a new expert identity emerge in the form of 'regional experts'?⁶

Politicising coexistence

Coexistence was proposed by the EC as a technical framework for the introduction of GM crops into European agriculture. However, it became controversial, subverted, re-interpreted and used in ways unintended by the EC; it became a new focal point of politicising the GMO case. The controversy over coexistence concerns the political geography of Europe, the idea of which differs among the actors involved—the EC, environmentalist NGOs, the European regions. Engagement in relation to coexistence contributes to shaping Europe—in terms of the distribution of power and legitimacy of actions and knowledge. In the case of the European regions involved, resistance to coexistence introducing GM crops into Europe has contributed to articulating a (political, epistemic, cultural and agricultural) identity of regions in the EU and has a potential to become a vehicle of enhancing regionalisation.

This is precisely what we mean by politicising. The EC was assuming a framework (primarily in terms of an agreement about the introduction of GM crops and contamination thresholds, and also in terms of the political

geography of Europe) within which coexistence represents a technical solution to concerns over genetic contamination related to the introduction of GM crops into Europe. Questioning of the framework (in discourse and action) sets politicising in motion. Conflict over a specific issue also becomes conflict over the organisation of society—in terms of power, knowledge or ways of life.

Notes

- ¹ In its report on coexistence, the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development of the EP appealed to the EC to clarify the meaning of these expressions. The EC later defined them on their web pages as ‘(...) the case where farmers can show the competent authorities that they have taken appropriate measures to avoid the presence of GM material’ (http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/food/bio-technology/exemption/index_en.htm).
- ² Cf. *Contribution of the regions and local authorities to the European debate on the coexistence of genetically modified crops with traditional and organic farming* (European Network of GMO-Free Regions 2004).
- ³ The Assembly of European Regions defines itself as a political organisation of regions in Europe, and represents their interests at the European and international level. It was created in 1985 and has 250 member regions from 26 European countries and 12 interregional organisations (cf. <http://www.are-regions-europe.org/GB/A1/A1.html>).
- ⁴ Members that joined later: Lazio-I, Ile de France-F, Sardegna-I, Provincia autonoma di Bolzano-I, Bretagne-F, Poitou-Charentes-F, Emilia Romagna-I, Styria-A.
- ⁵ This possible link has been signalled in the recent UK election campaign, as indicated by an article in the *Guardian*. ‘Michael Howard’s latest foray into populist electioneering with a seven-point plan to curb illegal Gypsy and Travellers’ encampments last night triggered claims that he is deliberately seeking to turn a real rural problem into a racially charged political controversy. But the Conservatives will deploy the tactics again today. Peter Lilley, the former cabinet minister, will reject claims that the country benefits from sustained immigration, and the shadow environment minister, Tim Yeo, will promise to “prevent any commercial planting of GM crops” unless or until it is safe’ (White 2005).
- ⁶ The programme of the third conference of the Network of GM-free European Regions announced ‘experts from the adherent regions’ in the section *The network and scientific world*.

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