

Chapter 8

ESTONIA

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Introduction

In the closing years of the 20th century, Europe witnessed a number of disturbing food-related crises and issues, some with serious outcomes. They included cases of deliberate and illicit adulteration, contamination with noxious chemicals from industrial effluents and the involvement of animal diseases, including bacterial infections and bovine spongiform encephalopathy. In some countries these crises generated growing scepticism about food safety information deriving from governmental and other official authorities. These food-related problems were the precursors of the great GM-food debate which remains largely unresolved to this day.

Political landscape and the dissemination of knowledge through websites

In Estonia there are various websites providing consumers and citizens with information about GM-foods. Some are governmental sites such as the main site of the Riigikogu (Parliament) <http://www.riigikogu.ee/> where the verbatim proceedings of meetings are reported), but most are from NGOs.

Factions can be formed by and must consist of not less than five members of the Riigikogu elected from the same list of candidates. Members of one list of candidates can form only one faction. Factions are groups through which much of the work of the Riigikogu proceeds: political decisions are agreed upon and those decisions form the basis for expressing one's opinion in a committee, at the sittings of the plenary assembly of the parliament or in public. A faction is a place for making political agreements. This does not mean that there can never be different opinions within a faction. Factions, like members of the Riigikogu and committees, have the right to initiate draft legislation; this ensures the opposition factions an opportunity to prepare and defend their own draft legislation in the Riigikogu.

The main factions are:

Estonian Centre Party faction - 29 members
Estonian Green Party Faction - 6 members
Estonian People's Union faction - 6 members
Estonian Reform Party faction - 31 members
Faction of the Social Democratic Party - 10 members
Pro Patria and Res Publica Union faction - 19 members

Two parties Estonian Green Party (<http://roheline.erakond.ee/>) and Estonian People's Union (<http://www.erl.ee>) explicitly mention GMO issues in their programmes while the other

parties tend to use GMO issues as part of the main policy programmes.

Three GMO related conferences have been supported financially by the Estonian Government – in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Many NGOs have been involved with informational and educational issues surrounding GMOs; their websites are directed mostly to the general public and consumers.

The Network of Estonian Non-profit Organizations (NENO) (<http://www.ngo.ee/>) is a national association of NGOs dedicated to the development of civic initiatives and the Estonian civil society, in which NENO is concerned with the links between public benefit nonprofits and society.

Traders and retailers belong to the non-profit voluntary association Eesti Kaupmeeste Liit (Estonian Traders' Association - <http://www.kaupmeesteliit.ee/>). It was established in April 1996 to bring together retailers with common interests in solving a variety of problems and to represent them in various institutions in Estonia and abroad. The association has 50 members - retail and wholesale enterprises.

The Estonian Fund for Nature (Eestimaa Looduse Fond [ELF] <http://www.elfond.ee/>) has a special link for about GMOs their readers (<http://eko.org.ee/gmo/>) while the Estonian Green Movement (<http://www.roheline.ee/>) publishes up-to-date news on related topics.

ETK (<http://www.etk.ee/>) is a founder member of the ECR-Estonia association and a pioneer for the development of co-operation between commerce and industry; they provide educational materials about GMOs.

GMO-free Estonia (<http://www.eko.org.ee/gmo/>), founded in March 2005, now has 1,074 individual supporters and 285 landowners supporting their campaign for Estonia free from GMOs.

There is a website for people interested in food and cuisine including GMOs (www.kokaraamat.ee) and another for teachers and pupils which also carries material about the subject (www.koolielu.ee). Information on GM-seeds is available at <http://www.soasepa.ee/>, and on (GM) soya products at <http://www.soja.ee/> while the site at <http://www.dermapteek.com> discusses different medicines, including drugs made by transgenic technologies.

In conclusion: we have found more than 50 websites in Estonian carrying information on GMOs, mostly neutral or positive in tone; some of them also have an English summary.

Food legislation issues concerning the GM-food

Food legislation in Estonia has to take into account the growing demand for transparency and traceability as required by EU regulations on GMO food and feed labelling, and traceability (EC1829/2003 and EC1830/2003) which came into force on April 18th, 2004. These regulations still lack specific operational interpretations valid throughout the EU.

In Estonia, the Ministry of Agriculture (<http://www.agri.ee/>) is responsible for issuing permits

for handling and marketing novel food, including genetically modified food.

The Advisory Committee of Novel Foods at the Ministry of Agriculture undertakes risk analyses of products received from, but not containing genetically modified organisms. The *Advisory Committee* submits to the Veterinary and Food Board applications for permits for the handling of novel foods and, based on information and documentation provided by the applicants, offers a view on the compliance of novel foods, proposals about their labelling and the issuing of permits when satisfied they have sufficient information.

The Commission for Gene Technology provides advice to government on matters of gene technology including the authorising the marketing of GM-products including novel foods.

Public attitudes towards GMO-food.

It is, of course, impossible to predict how consumers will respond to food labelled as containing GM-ingredients, hence the dilemma for retailers, manufacturers and farmers. Some retailers claim no philosophical objection to offering GM-products but are clearly worried about the effect on their sales, especially if they are the first locally to do so.

The exercise of both individual and collective consumer choice in the matter of GM-foods has consequential implications for crop breeders, for the farmers who grow the crops, for the industries that process and distribute them and for the retailers who ultimately sell to the consumers in their stores. It will also affect restaurateurs, schools, hospitals and residential institutions, as well as those who write about food or offer advice on nutritional matters, and will influence official policy-making.

Published opinion polls and preferences for students (a group of educated consumers)

To obtain an overview of consumer preferences, we analysed published data from different surveys performed by Estonian Institute of Economic Research (EKI). Consumer attitudes to GM- and organic food in 2006 were as follows:

Shopping preferences:

14% - no difference, GMO or GMO-free

1% - GM-food

34% - only GM-free food

51% - organic food

A more detailed survey was undertaken in 2001 and 2005, summarised below::

Is there enough information available about GM food (in % of answers)?

year	available	more information needed	no information	not interested
2001	6	41	49	4
2005	8	33	51	8

Common attitude towards GM-cultivation

year	should be prohibited	under serious inspection	equal to ordinary agriculture	should be promoted
2001	19	60	19	2
2005	45	42	9	4

Common attitude and knowledge of safety, quality and environmental safety of GMOs; purchasing preferences

year	definitely buying	possibly buying	definitely not buying	no difference
2001	5	43	26	26
2005	2	24	46	28

Is GM-food safe?

year	yes	no	don't know
2001	20	32	48
2005	5	47	48

Is GM-food of better quality?

year	yes	no	don't know
2001	24	30	46
2005	7	45	48

Would the use of GMOs improve the agriculture in Estonia?

year	yes	no	don't know
2001	39	18	43
2005	12	34	54

Are GMOs safe for the environment?

year	yes	no	don't know
2001	36	14	50
2005	40	11	49

Are GMOs dangerous for your health?

year	yes	no	don't know
2001	37	12	51
2005	49	10	41

Is there an ethical issue with GMO use?

year	yes	no	don't know
2001	53	13	34
2005	51	11	38

As part of the CONSUMERCHOICE project, a specific questionnaire was developed for a consumer survey and put to students from the Tallinn University of Technology from whom 124 completed questionnaires were returned. The questions and answers together with a summary of the survey is given below:

The next questions have been included into questionnaires:

1. According to law, does food with GM-ingredients have to be labelled?
Yes/No/Don't know
2. Before deciding to buy a particular item do you always read (or have you previously read) the detailed contents listing on the package?
Answers on a six point approval scale
3. I do/do not know how to tell when a product contains GM-ingredients
Answers on a six point approval scale
4. Compared with other foods, I regard those containing GM-ingredients as being safer/less safe/about the same.
5. I am strongly in favour/against the use of-GM ingredients in food
In favour/against/neutral
6. I am careful never to buy food labelled as containing GM-material.
7. I do buy/have bought food that I know or believe contains GM-ingredients.
8. I don't care if the food I buy contains GM-material.
9. I do/would buy food with GM-ingredients because/if, compared with other food, it is/were (a) healthier (b) cheaper (c) tastier (d) grown in a more environmental friendly. You may check more than one of these.
10. In general I believe that the use of gene technology in food production is: good/bad
Answers will be measured with a ten point valuation scale

Summary of responses:

1		2	3	4		5		6		7		8		9		10
yes	106	3.69	3.06	safer	15	in favour	13	yes	37	yes	72	yes	38	a	50	6.19
no don't know	3			less safe	46	against	32	no	87	no	52	no	86	b	58	
	15			same	63	neutral	79							c	40	

Media analysis – newspaper articles

During the period from May 6th, 2006 - April 24th, 2008 articles on GMO issues were published in the Estonian press as follows:

distribution	title	frequency	total no. of articles	positive towards GM	negative towards GM	neutral
national	Eesti Päevaleht	daily	7	1	4	2
	Postimees	daily	17	3	9	5
	SL Õhtuleht	daily	2		2	
	Eesti Ekspress	weekly	2		1	1
	Maaleht	weekly	3		2	1
	Äripäev	daily	6	1	2	3
	Sirp	weekly	1	1		
regional	Sakala	daily	2		2	
	Meie Maa	daily	5		2	3
	Nädaline	daily	1			1
	Põhjarannik	daily	2	2		
	Virumaa Teataja	daily	0			
	Pärnu Postimees	daily	1			1
	Koit	thrice a week	0			
	Lääne Elu	thrice a week	0			
	Valgamaalane	thrice a week	1			1
	Vooremaa	thrice a week	2			2
	Võrumaa Teataja	thrice a week	1		1	
	LõunaLeht	weekly	0			
	Summary			53	8	25

GM-foods on sale

As well as a cooperative (Consum), there are seven major food stores chains operating supermarkets and hypermarkets in Estonia :

1. A-Selver AS (<http://www.selver.ee>)
2. Comarket AS (<http://www.comarket.ee>)
3. Prisma Peremarket AS (<http://www.prismamarket.ee>)
4. Rimi Eesti Food AS (<http://www.rimi.ee>)
5. Stockmann AS (<http://www.stockmann.ee>)
6. Säätumarket (<http://www.smarket.ee>)
7. Maxima (<http://www.maxima.ee>)

There have been 28 shop visits to identify 9 labelled GM-products and 6 labelled as GMO-free in the period July 2006 - April 2007, rising to 13 and 17, respectively in the period April 2007 - April 2008.

Most of the soya products on the shelves contain no GM-soya as stated on the labels. Most of the GM-food available in Estonia is soya oil or food items containing soya oil as an ingredient:.

- 7 different edible oils containing GM-ingredients and properly labelled;
- margarines with GM-ingredients;
- snacks containing GM-oil;

- salads have recently appeared in supermarket containing GM-oil.

The main retailers are:

- Baltazar Trading AS (www.baltazar.ee)
- OÜ Claire Foods (www.clairefoods.ee)
- Rimi Baltic Group (www.rimi.ee), the only retailer who agreed to answer our questions. They have no special policy concerning GMOs

Discussion

The most intensive period of discussions about GM-food in Estonia was from 2001 to 2005, before the country joined the EU. The most important reason was a lack of information for the consumers. More information has become available following the launch of the “GMO-free Estonia” movement, most of it negative in character.

The political landscape is characterised by programme documents issued by the Green Party and the Estonian People’s Union who are allied in the hope of success in the forthcoming elections. The Estonian Green Party is the leading voice against GMOs in Estonia, with many articles from members of the party published in newspapers and magazines.

With regard to regional consumer attitudes, Ida-Virumaa, a county in the north-east located close to the Russian border, has a large Russian population who watch mostly Russian TV and read Russian newspapers. The Russian media tend to be anti-GM: below is an example of a report from Russia of GM-food being banned from schools and pre-school facilities in Moscow:

ITAR-TASS: G-modified foods to be banned from Moscow schools

MOSCOW, May 1, 20065 -- Foodstuffs containing genetically modified products will be banned from Moscow schools and pre-school childcare centers, the Moscow Mayor's office has told Itar-Tass, as follows from an instruction issued by Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

“Scientists have not fully studied the effects of genetically modified products on the human body yet. The city authorities have decided to take precautions to protect the city’s population, in particular youngsters, from the unfavorable effects the use of such products may have, and to ban the g-modified foods from children’s diet”, the source said.

The packages of genetically modified products on offer at Moscow's supermarkets will carry the appropriate warning.

(<http://www.nwrage.org/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1316>)