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Democratic decisions cannot be taken in the dark

Reforming “Comitology”

Last year, after two excruciating years filled with debates and political stalemates, experts from the EU Member States reached an agreement on the renewal of the license to sell [glyphosate](#), the herbicide, in the EU. [This decision](#), which was only made possible by a surprise and extremely unpopular vote from the German Agriculture Minister, left the wider public frustrated and angry. The Greens/EFA are pushing for more transparency, more democracy and fewer dangerous products on the EU market - to achieve this we have to change the flawed decision-making process that in the EU jargon is called “comitology”.

Lately, the European Union is accused on a regular basis of being un-democratic, non-transparent and closer to industry than to citizens' interests.

When it comes to environmental protection, these accusations are largely inaccurate since, in the past 20 years, the EU has provided major legislative breakthroughs which might never have happened solely on the national level.

However, these criticisms are certainly true when it comes to the flawed decision-making “comitology” process, which is used, among other things, to authorise potentially dangerous and [unpopular substances](#) for sale on the EU market, such as genetically modified imports and genetically modified seeds, as well as active substances contained in pesticides.

A failed decision-making process

The re-approval of glyphosate is the latest example of the failures behind this process. Despite the fierce opposition from EU citizens and a clear demand from the European Parliament to ban this herbicide as soon as realistically possible, member states were pressured into approving a renewal for fear of Monsanto putting the EU to Court.

This is because, behind the yawn-inducing term “comitology”, lies a system in which experts from member states - whose names are kept secret - give opinions behind closed doors on usually un-published legislative proposals. If they cannot reach a qualified majority in favour or against the proposal (this means 55% of the member states representing 65% of citizens), the decision comes back to the Commission, which then has the power to take a decision on its own. The European Parliament has no say in the matter.

This puts the Commission in a difficult position: if the member states don't manage to reach an agreement, they are left to take extremely unpopular decisions without a political mandate. In the case of glyphosate, this situation explains the incredible pressure put on member states to change their minds, even at the cost of major national political crisis and rising euro-scepticism.

The European Parliament is working on changing the system

The glyphosate file, as well as the repeated failures by the national experts to decide on GMOs - are the main reasons why President Juncker finally proposed [to reform the comitology system](#) in February this year. Finally, there was an opportunity for the EU co-legislators (the European Parliament and the Council) to re-balance the powers and to design a functional new system!

The first step in this reform by the European Parliament was taken today, with the vote on an opinion in the Committee on Industry, research and energy. The opinion calls for a complete change in the decision-making process when it comes to substances or products that are potentially dangerous for public health or the environment.

Firstly, the opinion calls for total transparency of the draft texts, asking for a public register of committee proceedings available via internet. Even more importantly, the report proposes to end the Commission's power to decide on its own: so either the member states reach a qualified majority in favour of a product, or it can't be authorised at all. Finally, to avoid the endless reiteration of political stalemates, it is asking the possibility for the European Parliament or the Council to rescind implementing powers given to the Commission when the situation requires it.

Claude Turmes, Greens/EFA rapporteur, commented that "EU Citizens have the right to know what their governments are defending in their names when they negotiate in Brussels, and it is not acceptable that, despite political stalemates, dangerous products can still be authorised against the will of the majority of countries."

Next steps

It is but the beginning, as four other Parliament Committees still have to express their views before a vote is taken in plenary. A lengthy process indeed, but at least the European Parliament seems to have taken this issue seriously.

For its part, the Council, composed of the EU member states, has apparently decided this file is not important enough for them to work on it. This raises the following question: are Member States happy to continue to hide behind the big bad Commission, which they can then go home and blame in front of the cameras, or will they finally assume their responsibility for decisions taken "in Brussels"?

The problem is, whatever the European parliament decides, the rules will not change without the Council's agreement. The reform can still move forward, but only if the national governments feel pressure from their citizens to finally care about democracy and transparency in the EU by coming out of the dark. As Greens/EFA, we are pursuing our work for a more democratic and more transparent European Union!

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