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Thirty six objections and counting

Why the European Parliament opposes new EU GMO authorisations in vain

Thirty six. That is the number of objections that the European Parliament has voted through, against the draft authorisations of genetically modified plants in the EU put forward by the European Commission ([the most recent objections against a GM soy and a GM maize](#)).

[The 36 objections](#) (voted since December 2015, equivalent to **almost one per month**) include three against the cultivation of GM maizes on European soil, 32 against authorisations for importing GM crops into the EU (imports from third countries for food and feed) and one against the import of a GM carnation.

In 34 of these cases, the Member states did not manage to reach a qualified majority in favour of these authorisations, and produced no official position. The last two have not yet been put to the final vote, but it doesn't take a magic ball to guess the result will be the same.

In 24 of these cases, the European Commission has happily ignored both the indecision of Member states (and hence the lack of a clear political majority) and the European Parliament's clear disagreement and went ahead to authorize the GM plants anyway. Nine additional authorisations are expected in the coming weeks.

Does this look undemocratic to you? Perhaps you're wondering how this situation has become even worse, even after Jean-Claude Juncker himself, upon taking office in 2014, recognized the failings of this decision-making procedure, and recalled that a majority of EU citizens were opposed to GM plants in the field and in their food?

All this is the result of a failed decision-making process called comitology, alongside a lot of lobbying from the agro-chemical industry.

A failed decision-making process

Behind the yawn-inducing term "comitology", lies a system in which experts from the Member states - whose names are kept secret - give their opinions behind closed doors on usually un-published legislative

proposals. If they cannot reach a qualified majority either in favour or against the proposal (qualified majority meaning 55% of the Member states representing 65% of EU citizens), the decision goes back to the Commission, which then has the power to take a decision completely on its own.

In most of the cases (so-called “implemented acts”[1]), the European Parliament has no say in the matter, and can only vote on objections, which are essentially a political commentary.

This puts the Commission in a difficult position: if the Member states do not manage to reach an agreement, the Commission becomes responsible for taking extremely unpopular decisions with no political mandate. Even easier, then, for the companies who asked for the authorisations in the first place (in this case Bayer, Dow-Dupont, Syngenta...) to put pressure on the European Commission.

According to a [recent report by lawyer Cécile Robert \(summary here\)](#), commissioned by the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament, this obscure, opaque and technocratic decision process is undermining the EU democratic system and the trust of EU citizens, all the while giving more weight to lobbyists.

This authorisation procedure for GMOs is a textbook example of how the “comitology” process can reach deadlock when the decisions on the table are both political and controversial.

Member States block reform

In February 2018, the European Commission proposed a reform of this system, at least for the more controversial issues such as GMOs, pesticides and other potentially toxic substances. While the draft is insufficient to solve the problems, it is at least a starting point for a much-needed discussion on how to increase transparency, democracy and legitimacy in the comitology system.

The European Parliament has started to deal with this file, albeit slowly. But for its part, the Council, composed of the EU governments, has apparently decided it is not important enough to work on. This raises the following question: are Member States happy to continue hiding behind the big bad Commission, which they can blame in front of the cameras back home, or will they finally take their own responsibility for the decisions taken “in Brussels”?

As a new legislature is about to start, it is worrying to think that MEPs, the EU citizens’ directly elected representatives, might have to continue repeating their opposition to GMOs over and over again, without ever being listened to. [There is a strong and urgent need to rebalance the powers](#) between the EU institutions and to stop abandoning so-called “technical issues” to an undemocratic, technocratic and opaque process. This is what the Greens/EFA will support in the coming years.

[1] Implementing acts: drafted by the Commission and voted by the Member states by a qualified majority. The European Parliament has next to no intervention on these acts.

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European External Action Service (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/eeas/32978511020>)



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