**Chapter 4**

**Regionalism, food sovereignty and GM crops**

**Introduction**

Regionalism is a traditional subject of international relations studies. The concept of ‘region’ is ‘an ambiguous term’; it has more than a geographical component and definitely includes discussions of security issues (Nye, 1968, p. VI). Region can have a geographical meaning with proximity and specificity being key criteria and strategic and functional meaning which includes economic, environmental and cultural commonality (Vayrynen, 2003, p. 26). Physical definitions of regions are attempts from states to reaffirm their boundaries and organise their territories, while ‘functional conceptualizations of regions emanate from the interplay of subnational and transnational’ processes which are only partially controllable ([Vayrynen, 2003](file:///C%3A%5C%5CUsers%5C%5Cesprague%5C%5CDesktop%5C%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C%5C01_from%20WFS%5C%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_248_FILE150310865PI004%22%20%5Co%20), p. 27). The politics of regionalism is a response to the larger processes of globalisation and particularly its aspect of international trade, economic and political integration. From this perspective, states may perceive regionalism as a defence mechanism against rising international competition (Pelagidis and Papasotiriou, 2002). Thus, regionalism is an accompanying process of globalisation. It can be a strategy of a state or region to adapt to new challenges in the international environment and provide some degree of autonomy. Castells suggested the notion of a regionalised global economy: ‘That is, a global system of trade between trading areas, with increasing homogenization of customs within areas, with increasing homogenization of customs within the area, while maintaining trade barriers vis-à-vis the rest of the world’ (Castells, 2000, p. 111).

Castells’s concept of networks is also relevant to discussions on regionalism. In the globalised trade system, actual trading units include firms, multinational companies (MNCs) and their networks ([Castells, 2000](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx#Ref_201_FILE150310865PI004), p. 115). At the same time regions ‘under the impulse of their governments and business elites, have restructured themselves to compete in the global economy, and . . . have established networks of cooperation between regional institutions and between region-based companies’ ([Castells, 2000](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx#Ref_201_FILE150310865PI004), p. 412). Regional authorities are left by their states to connect with the local community and can also develop strategies to compete in the global system under the processes of larger integration and regional de-centralisation. To link up, they need to (re)construct a particular identity (ethnic, territorial, religious) which may take over that of the state (Castells, 2004, p. 339). This point is in line with Kollmorgen’s definition of regionalism as a

clustering of environmental, economic, social, and governmental factors to such an extent that a distinct consciousness of separate identity with the whole, a need for autonomous planning, a manifestation of cultural peculiarities, and a desire for administrative freedom, are theoretically recognized and put in practice.

(Kollmorgen, 1945, p. 385)

Agriculture has always been a sensitive area for national governments. Since the establishment of the Bretton Woods regime in international trade, international organisations have pushed for more liberalisation in trade, while national governments have resisted. Trade in agricultural products was discussed at different rounds of GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), such as the Dillon Round (1960–1961) and the Kennedy Round (1963–1967), without much success in reducing trade barriers and tariffs. Only after the launch of the Uruguay Round (1986–1994) did trade liberalisation in agriculture begin to move forward (Lee, 2007). Thus, since the mid-1990s, national governments, farmers and their organisations have been concerned with new changes and have had to consider possible responses to protect their interests.

Another important concept to be discussed in relation to the discourse of regionalism is food sovereignty. This is a derivative of the notion of food security which places the focus on self-sufficiency in food production and at household, community, regional and state levels. The first conceptualisation of food sovereignty dates back to 1996 when La Via Campesina and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) introduced food sovereignty in their position papers. The FAO held the World Food Summit, and in its action plan specified that ‘each State must adopt a strategy consistent with its resources and capacities to achieve its individual goals . . . and, at the same time, cooperate regionally internationally in order to organize collective solutions to global issues of food security’ (FAO, 1996).

La Via Campesina, which is now an international movement – a network of NGOs working and representing farmers – was set up in 1993 in Mons, Belgium. It has since grown to represent about 200 million farmers through 164 local and national organisations in 73 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas (La Via Campesina, 2011). It defines food sovereignty as ‘the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity’ (La Via Campesina, 1996). Priority is given to ‘local food production and consumption’. Such an interpretation of the concept ‘gives a country the right to protect its local producers from cheap imports and to control production’ (ARC, 2014).

Both food security and food sovereignty refer to food production and consumption, yet these are different. Some have argued that ‘food security’ is a technical term while ‘food sovereignty’ is a political term. For example, FAO experts argued:

The concept of food security – adopted by FAO member states – is somehow a neutral concept in terms of power relations. It does not prejudge the concentration of economic power in the different links of the food chain and in the international food trade, or the ownership of key means of production such as land, or more contemporarily, access to information.

(Gordillo and Mendez Jeronimo, 2013, p. VI)

Another means of production in agriculture is seeds. Under the global trend towards the liberalisation of international trade, states have to dismantle protective mechanisms at national level. National genetic resources and biotech innovations have been seen as trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights. This has effectively led national governments to be obliged to uphold patent protection over the microorganisms and microbiological processes used in agricultural production, as presented in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (Lee, 2007). This has become a matter of concern in both developing and developed countries, particularly those in which the agricultural sector is less competitive in global terms. So ‘the concept of food sovereignty begins precisely with noting the asymmetry of power in the various markets involved and the various spheres of power involved in food, as well as in the areas of multilateral trade negotiations’ (Gordillo and Mendez Jeronimo, 2013, p. VI).

On this ground, it is possible to argue that while some NGOs push for food sovereignty from the perspective of farmers, national governments interpret the concept in their agenda at regional level in political terms. This argument can be illustrated with two case studies of NGOs opposing GM crops – Danube Soya, German and National Association for Genetic Safety (NAGS), Russian.

**GENET, GMO-free Europe and Danube Soya**

For a quick pre-Christmas get-together dinner, I invited my Bulgarian and German friends. The German is a devoted vegetarian and volunteered to bring a dessert. It is a mix of frozen berries and soya yoghurt which tasted delicious. For my other friend and myself, soya yoghurt is a novel idea. My next soya experience occurred in Germany when teaching in Berlin. In the German capital’s food shops, almost everything is organic and bio-labelled, and I could not find a small tin of cow’s milk in any city centre grocery shop, so I ended up adding soya milk to my tea for breakfast. It tastes fine, but it does require the palate to get used to it.

My first encounter with organic soya was during the visit to the GMO-free Europe Conference in 2015. But, first, a little bit of background. The GMO-free Europe, a network of NGOs lobbying against GM crops, is a spin-off organisation by GENET, which is a ‘European network of non-governmental non-profit organizations engaged in the critical debate of genetic engineering, founded in 1995 in Switzerland’. Its mission is ‘to provide information on genetic engineering to its member organizations and the interested public and to support their activities and campaigns’. Currently it has 51 organisations listed as members in 27 European countries (GENET, 2016, para. 1). It can be argued that both networks represent a regional discourse in the GM crop debate and serve as examples of how civil society groups cooperate with regional and municipal authorities.

GMO-free Europe has been run as a series of conferences. The first listed on its website is one held in Vienna in 2003 ‘to support the strategic and practical work of civil society groups to foster those agricultural and food processing practices which do not need GE and to strengthen the groups to resist the continuing pressure to adopt GE in agriculture’ (GENET, 2003).

In 2005, the conference was held in Berlin and attended by 250 delegates. Among them a group of representatives of European national and municipal authorities, including Andrä Rupprechter from the Ministry of Agriculture, Austria (which then held the EU presidency); Josef Stockinger, Agricultural Minister of Upper-Austria; Fabio Boscaleri, Agricultural Ministry of Tuscany, Italy; Pawel Polanecki, Deputy Chairman of the Sejim of Mazowie, Poland; Gabriele Friderich, City Council of Munich, Germany; Janusz Wojciechowski, Vice-President of the European Parliament’s Committee for Agriculture, Poland; and Hansjörg Walter, Member of the Swiss Parliament and President of the Farmers’ Union of Switzerland (GMO-free Europe, 2005b). The conference issued the Berlin Manifesto for GMO-free Regions and Biodiversity in Europe. The document proclaimed the right and duty of regions to decide ‘about the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the shape of our landscape’ and stressed that such decisions were not to be imposed by individual farmers, bureaucrats or companies (GMO-free Europe, 2005a). Another right and duty given to the regions was to protect seeds from genetic modification in order to remain what can effectively be called regional food sovereignty:

Protecting and encouraging the conservation and breeding of native and adapted local varieties and the integrity of farm saved seeds is an important duty and right of regional agricultural policy. As seeds reproduce there can be no thresholds for any unlabelled GM contamination of non-GM conventional, organic and traditional varieties.

([GMO-free Europe, 2005](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-Ref%20Mismatch%20Report.docx#LStERROR_323)a)

After two years of silence (the previous conference was held in 2012), in 2015 the Group produced three (!) parallel conferences with the following agendas: the European GMO-free Regions Network, Danube Soya Association and NGOs and Scientists network of GMO-free regions. In the tradition of the 2005 Berlin conference of GMO-free Europe, the Danube Soya Association had prepared the culmination of the joint events – the signature of the Berlin Declaration on 8 May 2015 at the North Rhine-Westphalia Representation. The Declaration contains six articles and aims at complete withdrawal of GMO crops across Europe (GMO-free Europe, 2015a).

Perhaps a little explanation on the European regional agricultural context might be helpful in understanding the rationale for such an organisation as Danube Soya. Agriculture has always been a sensitive topic for the EU. On the one hand, member states must ensure there is enough food for their citizens, and in the immediate post-war years, such supplies were low. On the other hand, Europe increased its self-sufficiency in food production and soon other problems appeared – agricultural surpluses which demanded market interventions into supply and demand. To manage agricultural policies in common space, the European Community (EC) has created the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This is an example of a regional European agricultural policy which reflects the duality of EC member states’ position: states had to compete among each other within the integrated European market and coordinate joint policy to sustain external competition. The weight of farming lobbies has been traditionally solid, which had to be acknowledged by politicians, and in addition, farmers’ interests should be represented by numerous European NGOs and their networks. For example, the Agricultural and Rural Convention (ARC2020) was set up in 2010 as a multi-NGO platform and since 2013 it has evolved into a separate NGO whose main activities are aimed at ‘offering a space to regenerate public debate in Europe, while also drawing the public’s attention to both controversies and narratives on future farming, food and rural policies’ (ARC, 2016). So it appears to be a normal European practice to set up an NGO to lobby on behalf of farmers’ interests.

Agricultural production in developed countries has contributed to the increase in policies, but world economic activity has caused a reduction in demand and, in turn, the prices for many crops such as cereals have stagnated. Technological progress has allowed farmers to produce more at less cost, promising to produce even more agricultural supply. In light of further technological advances, particularly in biotechnology, Europe and America have experienced enormous pressure to find uses for thousands of tonnes of excess produce. For example, this explains why high fructose corn syrup has been developed and added to numerous food products. It is clearly related to the existence of an unsaleable maize surplus in the US (Raikes, 1988).

It is a similar story with soya. On the one hand, soya beans have resulted in a decrease in the production of animal feed and partially substitute cereals, while on the other, they have also provided new opportunities for market development across the whole production chain. This has been reflected at international trade negotiations.

In the Dillon Round of GATT, the EC entered into oilseed binding. By that time, European animal feed compounders found that a mixture of carbohydrates and vegetable protein were an acceptable and much cheaper substitute for the cereals used in animal feed. As a result of this demand, the supply of soya beans has grown, and it has affected the whole value chain of soya meal production, from growers to bean crushers. Yet, in the 1970s, the EC introduced a support system for oilseeds under its CAP, which paid direct subsidies to European soya crushers. When soya bean prices fell, the subsidies were increased and vice versa in order that European soya growers could maintain the same prices (Swinbank and Tanner, 1996, p. 103).

The German Farmers’ Union, the Deutscher Bauernverband, has been an important political player in German politics due to its links to the ruling political alliance of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany and Christian Social Union in Bavaria. For decades, Deutscher Bauernverband promoted the ideal of a family farm as the main goal of agricultural policy and supported producers’ prices so that each farming family could afford an average national standard of living (von Cramon-Taubadel, 2000, p. 412). Since joining the EC, German agriculture was the least competitive. With the country having lost some of its agricultural land due to its partition, crop yields were lower than in other member states and its protectionist measures were the most expensive, since German farmers were paid the highest cereal prices in Europe (Meunier, 2005; Ackrill, 2000).

In the 1990s, Germany faced several challenges. With reunification, the country had to restructure its farming sector. As an EC member, it had to participate in the Uruguay Round of GATT and accept the CAP reform, which was not welcomed by the German farming lobby (Wilson and Wilson, 2001; Von Cramon-Taubadel, 2000). The European expansion eastward also meant additional burdens to the CAP budget with the potential to pressurise agricultural prices in the European market and add to the threat of further agricultural surpluses (Wilson and Wilson, 2001, p. 262).

Danube Soya represents this trend to provide better opportunities to European farmers and develop a regional market as a countermeasure to external dependency in food production. While it was initially developed in Austria, the initiative has full support from the German authorities because it matches the German strategy to support farming families and address the current challenges caused by the European extension eastwards and the possible dismantling of CAP. The initiative is supported by funds from Austrian and German development agencies – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit and the Austrian Development Cooperation (Danube Soya, 2016). The meetings of the organisation’s conference in 2015 were held in the Austrian Embassy and the Representation Offices of Thuringia, Hesse and the North Rhine-Westphalia in Berlin. The Austrian Embassy hosted a generous evening reception for all participants of the GMO-Free Conference. Dr Nikolaus Marschik, the Austrian Ambassador to Germany, delivered a welcome speech, which was followed by the symbolic act of planting soya seeds by Max Hiegelsberger (Regional Ministry for Agriculture Upper Austria), Horst Becker (Parliamentary State Secretary Ministry of Climate Protection, Environment, Agriculture, Conservation, and Consumer Protection of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia) and Matthias Krön, President of Danube Soya (GMO-free Europe, 2015b).

After the first meeting in 2010 and the initial ‘dream’, the project was developed into an association in 2012 (Gaugitsch, 2015). It was registered in Vienna, Austria, as an international non-profit association, or NGO. Its chairman, Matthias Krön, said in 2015 that it is ‘a public organization, not a lobby’. The aim of the association is ‘to bring farmers, seed and feed companies, traders, processors and animal owners on board with the same concept – promotion of the European protein supply’, but it must be GMO-free. As seen from the name, the association promotes the cultivation of GM-free soya in Europe. Indeed, in Krön’s own words, soya ‘should receive a European passport’ (2015b).

The name ‘Danube Soya’ for the association is a smart one. The Danube (Donau) is one of the largest rivers in Europe and flows through Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, and Bulgaria. Its tributaries, however, also include Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Montenegro, Switzerland, Italy, Poland, the Republic of Macedonia and Albania. And these countries, the main targets of the association, make up a good chunk of EU members and associated countries. In addition to being a common trade region with shared identities, the Danube region also composes half of Europe’s arable land. Some of these countries are more developed than the others, and the leadership of Germany is obvious. This is confirmed in the fact that German companies, members of the association, are acquiring or interested in gaining access to agricultural lands in the Danube countries to grow GM-free soya. This is, of course, not a coincidence. It makes Danube Soya a good name and a smart historic allusion.

In the project description, Danube Soya leaders begin with the presentation of soya as ‘a challenge’, specifically the North American export of soya to Europe: ‘Our dependence on soya import thus becomes a challenge for all of Europe’ (Danube Soya, 2016). Thus, the initiative seeks to address this challenge as ‘it provides a foundation for the production of high quality, origin-controlled GMO-free food and feed for the Danube region and the Western European market’. Further, it ‘will constitute a significant contribution to the independence of the European protein supply’ ([Danube Soya, 2016](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx#Ref_204_FILE150310865PI004)).

So why does the Association focus on soya? Because soya represents protein supply and creates new market opportunities. On average, the European population consumes 105g of protein per capita per day, 59% of which is from animal-derived products. The European Union imports soya beans and meal in large quantities. For example, 28 million tonnes were imported in 2013 (De Visser et al., 2014). This low self-sufficiency in protein-rich feed is disturbing and has been discussed in the European parliament (Hausling, 2011). It is Europe’s ‘protein dependency’ on countries such as Brazil, Argentina and the United States which poses an economical, ecological and political challenge, given the fact that around 95% of imported soya is produced with genetically modified seeds. Moreover, the demand for soya is constantly growing. Danube Soya (2015) suggested that European soya bean cultivation could increase by 300% within the next five years. In the session and B2B meeting of the Association in April 2016, soya producers were introduced to buyers and the audience was informed about the potential for the soya market to be developed beyond the feed market. This includes lecithin, tofu and soya milk production as well as products developed for the vegetarian diet, such as soya substitute products for meat (Danube Soya, 2016).

Partnering through the Association allows Western European companies to relocate their supply chain to Europe and obtain control over soya producers. The major rule is that soya crops are not GM. At the conference in 2015, the audience was reminded of the importance of keeping links between Western and Eastern Europe. In his speech, the chairman stressed that Ukraine, as a new addition to the association, has been very significant. In European terms, Ukraine has large, arable lands which are highly fertile due to its famous chernozem. According to Krön, soya import to Europe is a more difficult dependency than ‘the dependency on oil and gas’. This makes Danube Soya and Ukraine an interesting case to be placed in the current context of tensions between Europe and Russia.

There is also a geographic pattern relating to the soya bean buyers and sellers invited by the Association to its meeting in 2016: the buyers came from Germany and Austria, while sellers came from Central and Eastern Europe – Czech Republic, Croatia, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine (Danube Soya, 2016). An Austrian commercial laboratory which was jointly represented with an Austrian governmental institution, Environmental Agency Austria, offers consultancy services to the Danube Association’s members. The move eastwards is also reflected in the fact that the Danube Soya Congress [2016](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx#Ref_204_FILE150310865PI004) took place in Budapest, Hungary.

It is possible that both GM and non-GM soya can satisfy the growing European demand. On the basis of the quality of products and food safety, there is not much difference for consumers, unless they are taught to make preferences on other grounds; this is undertaken by explaining to European consumers the possible risks for human health and the environment from GM crops. But there is a difference in price. On the one hand, a European farmer will have to add €5 per pig fed with non-GM soya (Krön, 2015a). On the other, the cultivation of GM plants in Europe is subject to strict control and a regulatory system: only two crops are allowed (corn and potato), and in some European countries and regional communities, all GMO seeds are banned. In order to still enter the competition to grow the strategic crop and make the case for GM-free soya animal feed in the region despite its higher price, European countries need a strong political incentive. In this case, non-GM producers are supported by the Austrian and German state and regional authorities who have already promoted regulation on non-GM animal feed and sponsored voluntary GMO-free labelling for food companies. Both governments provide different support, including funding. So the association is more a political project than an act of civil society protest against GMO. This explains why European integration rhetoric is being used in the promotion of the Danube Soya Association.

The Danube Soya Association focuses a lot on business and political networking and labelling. Its activism includes a small number of public campaigns. These include an image campaign which ‘creates[s] light illustrations that pick up the doubts and fears of soya production in Europe’ (Behance, 2014). A series of watercolours has been produced by two Austrian artists, Brigitte Baldrian and Harald Hackel. The illustrations depict major issues of food security, such as CO2 emissions, overpopulation, deforestation and the negative impact of agriculture on the environment. The word ‘GMO’ is placed in a yellow triangle and crossed out. These artworks do not require any textual explanation and have been used as visual material at ‘some conferences in Europe’ ([Behance, 2014](file:///C%3A%5C%5CUsers%5C%5Cesprague%5C%5CDesktop%5C%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C%5C01_from%20WFS%5C%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_199_FILE150310865PI004%22%20%5Co%20)).

The style of this digital campaign has similarities with another series of illustrations developed for EuropaBio, the natural enemy of Danube Soya since it on the contrary promotes the use of transgenic agriculture in Europe. The video ‘Bureaucratic Barriers to Biotech’, made in 2012, tells the story of how biotech science has been blocked in Europe and uses the same EU symbols (EuropaBio, 2012).

**Russia: WTO, food sanctions, GMOs and NAGS**

Most Western readers are not familiar with Russian public debates on GM crops. Yet these debates reflect similar trends to those found in global debates on GM crops and are interesting examples of how GM crops have become a topic within the national agricultural policy.

At a glance, the official Russian position on GM crops appears to be negative. Yet there are many nuances, and the political context has been changing. In 2013, I acted as an expert, ranking start-up projects for Skolkovo, a state-funded innovation centre often called the ‘Russian Silicon Valley’. At the start-up conference, I met several people including one businessman who was working on different projects, one of which was agricultural. In addition, he worked as a partner for a senior partner, a well-known international business figure. From brief conversations, it appeared that Russian businessmen were very willing to consider GM technology as a tool to increase crop yields and secure better profits. However, top international management was more cautious and perhaps even better informed.

The ‘Food Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation’ (hereafter, the Doctrine) was signed by then President Medvedev on 30th January [2010](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx#Ref_229_FILE150310865PI004) and includes the formal position of the Russian authorities on food security. The structure of the Doctrine consists of the identification of risks towards food security and possible policy responses.

The duty of the state to guarantee food security for Russian citizens has been underlined in the document several times. Food security was named as one of the major elements of national security in the medium term. The policy goals listed in the Doctrine included ‘reliable food supplies to the population, developing the national agro-industrial and fish-producing sectors, responding promptly to internal and external threats to the stability of the food market, and participating effectively in international cooperation in the field of food security’ (Russian Federation, 2010, p.1). Thus, food security has been understood as food independence, which includes a set of appropriate goals such as ‘timely forecasting, detection and prevention of internal and external threats endangering food security, minimization of their negative consequences by ensuring constant operation of the system that supplies people with food’ ([Russian Federation, 2010](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-Ref%20Mismatch%20Report.docx#LStERROR_320), p. 3).

The challenges mentioned in the Doctrine include macroeconomic risks, resulting from the decreased attractiveness of Russian industry, the compatibility of national production and dependency on major factors of the economy on international economic institutions; technological risks, caused by the delay in the development of industrial innovation in Russia, differences in standards in food safety and the system of food safety control; agro-ecological risks associated with climate change and resulting from natural and man-made catastrophes; and international risks, caused by fluctuations in international markets and state protection measures in foreign countries ([Russian Federation, 2010](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-Ref%20Mismatch%20Report.docx#LStERROR_320), pp. 7–8).

The Doctrine has captured the decline of the Russian agricultural sector, illustrating that major sectors, such as the dairy, fishery and meat industries could satisfy only 50–70% of domestic demand. This also resulted in food price doubling in the period 2005–2008 (Ushachev, 2008). Agriculture was in many ways, including in terms of innovation and institutional infrastructure, left behind after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The agriculturalist and politician Konstantin Babkin, in his opening speech at the Agriculture Section of the Moscow Economic Forum in November 2012, joked that Russians would die off just as the mammoths did unless the decay of rural development and degradation of agriculture are halted (Torgovo-Promyshlennaya Palata, 2012). Thus, one of the targets was to upgrade existing agricultural capacities to satisfy the national demand for food and provide a higher degree of independence from agricultural exports. This can partially explain why Skolkovo businessmen were considering GM technology in 2013.

Another important event was Russia’s joining the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Working Party on the Accession of the Russian Federation was established in June 1993 and completed its mandate in November 2011. The Eighth Ministerial Conference approved the Accession Package of the Russian Federation on December 2011. On 22 August 2012, the Russian Federation became the WTO’s 156th member (WTO, 2012). Of course, joining the WTO with a less competitive agricultural industry would have been a concern for the Russian government and it also seemed to naturally coincide with the food sanctions, which are a modern example of protectionist policy in agriculture, in 2014.

In 2014, the EU imposed political sanctions on Russia as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. In response, the Russian government also imposed sanctions on Europe, restricting agricultural imports from EU member states. On the one hand, sanctions targeted a sensitive area for Europe – its agriculture, on the other, it was seen as an opportunity to allow Russian agro-business to strengthen its position. After two years of such a protectionist regime, such policy seemed to be working out, with the exception of the variety in choice of products and higher food prices for Russian consumers:

A handful of agricultural firms in Russia have stated that they fear sanction relief will undercut their expansion efforts. But while Russia cannot make brie cheese or grow certain fruits, it can pull more cod from the sea and produce more chicken from local farms. These firms and the Russian government that backs them with subsidies, are to some degree happy without Europe. As for the government, it retains rubles in the country. For food importers, it does away with exchange risk. Consumers, on the other hand, have had to face the brunt of the sanction regime. Import substitution is a long process and so prices have gone up.

(Rapoza, 2016)

In March 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin proclaimed that Russian consumers and the Russian market should be protected from GMO products. He also noted that work in this area should be carried out ‘carefully’ so not to violate the obligations of the Russian Federation in the WTO (Rosbalt, 2014).

At approximately the same time, Medvedev announced Russia ‘does not need GMOs’ and would be better off with organic agricultural products, mentioning the possible health risks of GM food for Russian consumers. He also argued that the Russian nation should be able to feed itself and do so without genetically modified products. He then noted that these restrictions should not affect scientific research on GMOs carried out in accredited laboratories (Prime, 2014).

In 2015, the Government Commission responsible for legal amendments approved a draft law prohibiting the cultivation and breeding of GMOs in the Russian territory. New changes were made in the regulation of GM crop production in Russia. The proposed amendments to the law on ‘state regulation in the field of genetic engineering activity’, ‘Seed’, ‘Environmental Protection’ and the Code of Administrative Offences introduced a legal responsibility for the unsanctioned production of GM crops (Vedomosti, 2015).

Russian policymakers have also confirmed ‘the right of the Russian Federation’ to ban the import of GM crops, due to the case that negative effects from GM crops on human health and the environment could be proven (Zamahina, 2015). Interestingly, Russian policymakers do not have a unilateral position on GM crops. Certain influential officials are known for their strong opinions. For example, Vice Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich is a well-known opponent to the use of GM crops in agriculture, while the former Minister for Health, Gennady Onishchenko, and members of the Communist party are proponents. For example, Communist MPs voted against the new law, noting that non-GM products could not compete with their GM counterparts in terms of crop yields and benefits for farmers. They stated that the production of transgenic agriculture is 10 times more profitable ([Zamahina, 2015](file:///C%3A%5C%5CUsers%5C%5Cesprague%5C%5CDesktop%5C%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C%5C01_from%20WFS%5C%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_253_FILE150310865PI004%22%20%5Co%20)).

The Russian Ministry for Science and Education also stepped into the debate to confirm the permit to conduct GMO research for scientific purposes. It was responsible for the formation of a network of laboratories to conduct testing for the identification of GMOs and to develop further techniques for testing ([Zamahina, 2015](file:///C%3A%5C%5CUsers%5C%5Cesprague%5C%5CDesktop%5C%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C%5C01_from%20WFS%5C%5C15031-0865-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_253_FILE150310865PI004%22%20%5Co%20)). MPs from the country’s largest party, United Russia, suggested a reduction in the allowed levels of GM residue from 0.9% to zero and, allied with organic farmers who made claims in support of such a proposal, argued that Russia should be independent from outside influence in its protection of the interests of its citizens (Lyalyakina, 2014).

The Russian authority that controls the quality of agricultural production, known as Rosselkhoznadzor, has used the GMO rhetoric to attempt to ban the export of animal feed from the EC on the grounds that soya-based animal feed contains GMO. In the pre-WTO period, Russia had lists of approved exporting companies. After the WTO entry, these lists were withdrawn and the new rhetoric allowed the Russian authorities to return to a more selective policy on agricultural exports (Gluhodedov, 2016). In 2015, Rosselkhoznadzor temporarily introduced a ban on the supply of products (milk and animal feed) from two European companies – Schils B.V. from the Netherlands and Josera GmbH & Co KG from Germany (Alimov, 2015).

Such protectionist policy cost the EU €5.3 billion [$5.9 billion], which was wiped off exports; according to the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Phil Hogan, €50 billion annually is spent by Brussels to counteract the cost of Russia’s restrictions on European farm produce (Hirst, 2016).

On the contrary, opponents of GM crops praised ‘the world’s largest nation’s ban’ ‘against Monsanto and the US-led GMO cartel’ which ‘concentrated minds on the essentials of life’ (Engdahl, 2015) and also picked up the rhetoric of restored Russian patriotism: Russians I spoke with during a visit August 2016to the Rostov region told me they realised that the taste of Russian food, such as tomatoes, was far superior to that of imported food, which is often artificially coloured and treated with chemical preservatives in order to extend its shelf life by looking fresh. Following the tumultuous collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the corrupt Yeltsin government opened the doors for Western agribusiness giants like Kraft, Nestlé, and Unilever to fill Russian stores with their agribusiness industrialised food products (Engdahl, 2015).

In 2015, a leading Russian channel showed a film about GM crops and global politics entitled ‘Seeds and Darnels’ made by two Russians, Konstantin Semin and Nikolay Diakov. The film is framed within the political context of the Ukranian conflict. The film-makers went to Ukraine and spoke to the Minister of Agriculture and concluded that a new Ukrainian government formed from the opposition movement, Maidan, would lift the ban on GM crops and sell land to American corporations. It was suggested that ‘Monsanto would enter into Europe from a back door – from Ukraine’. They also interviewed Vandana Shiva, who explained to Russian viewers that to destroy a farmer, to destroy a state is the recipe for monopoly’, leading to market dependency and the suicide of farmers (Semin, 2015).

After the film had its national debut, I received phone calls from relatives who, like most Russians, retain small allotments and grow vegetables, asking me to promise not to grow GM crops. But, despite this newly introduced suspicion, most Russians do not participate in the GM debate, although there are a few civil society groups that do.

After a quick browse of the internet I found a few Russian NGOs discussing GM crops on their websites. I sent an email to one by the name of NAGS but did not receive a response. Then, in May 2015, at the closing ceremony at the GMO-free Europe conference, I found myself standing next to a young woman from NAGS, and we started a conversation which then led to my brief interview with the organisation in Moscow in October 2015.

NAGS (National Association for Genetic Safety) is a Russian NGO or, as it calls itself, a ‘non-profit organization’, the main activity of which is ‘to ‘contribute to the protection of biological and genetic safety of humankind and the environment, and to promote sustainable development ideas in human consciousness’ (NAGS, date unknown). The NAGS brochure states that the organisation ‘has had a great influence on the development of public debate concerning the safety of modern biotechnology, including GMOs, in Russia’ (NAGS, date unknown). It lists six areas of activity: GMOs, sustainable development, food safety, organic agriculture, voluntary certification and genetic diversity conservation.

NAGS was founded in 2004 by Alexander Baranov (1946–2015) and Elena Sharoykina. Baranov was a Senior Research Associate at the N.K. Kolzov Institute of Biological Development who conducted his research in the area of studies on plant population and genetic diversity. He published three monographs and 70 articles. During 200–2003 he was a member of a committee established by the Ministry of Natural Resources to provide guidance to the Russian government in regard to the management of GMOs. He was named as one of the experts who initially helped to block the commercialisation of GMOs. He also acted as a councillor to the Ministry of Energy, providing advice on technological regulations, and was a Russian representative to the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture (Nauka i Zizn, 2007), a civil society network that brings together international activists, including Dr Vandana Shiva.

Elena Sharoykina was born in Ukraine in 1979 and graduated from the Dnepropetrovk National University with a Masters in Journalism. In the 1990s, she worked as a journalist in Ukraine covering political affairs and founded the Dneprovsky Centre in Social Studies (Russia.ru, 2012). She moved to Moscow to run her own consulting and media business and worked as a TV presenter at one of the leading Russian TV channels – Rossia – from 2008–2009. NAGS was formed as a result of her interest in environmentalism, and it is funded with profits from her media firm. This was her conscious choice, since it allows the organisation ‘to be independent and not [to] take grants’, although it is accepted that crowd-funding might be a funding option too (Sharoykina, 2015). In 2015, according to its brochure, NAGS had six members; two co-founders, a PR director, creative director, project manager and fundraising coordinator (NAGS, date unknown).

Elena is extremely well-established in Russia. For her TV series entitled ‘Bio-razvedka’, which translates as bio-intelligence, she interviewed Russian celebrities and European scientists about their views on GM crops. She also made contact with Skolkovo and Russian politicians including Vladislav Surkov, the former head of the president’s office (Sharoykina, 2015). During our interview, I met two established officials from the Russian State Duma, one responsible for ‘agrarian questions’ and another for risk analysis and cooperation within the WTO and other international organisations.

To my question as to how many NGOs in Russia work on the question of GM crop debates, they answered that there are less than 10. One is a network called Hraniteli (translated from Russian as The Guardians), which defines itself as ‘like-minded people interested in [the] preservation and development of ecological agriculture, [and] consumers rights’, supporting the idea of local production and tasty, pure, honest food (Hraniteli, 2016). It is also a member of the Slow Food International whose programme Slow Food Kovcheg runs projects to preserve national agricultural biodiversity, promote healthy eating, raise awareness of the cultural and gastronomic traditions of the nations of the world and encourage food education and youth education projects. Another partner is Pravda o ede (translates as ‘Truth about Food’). Both Hraniteli and Pravda o ede are managed by the same circle of people and are small organisations. International NGOs such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace do not participate in the Russian public debate on GM. Indeed, Greenpeace has even closed down its programme on GM crops in Russia, as Elena pointed out. Sharoykina’s colleagues told me that President Putin is against GMO and that two areas in Russia, Krasnodar and the Far East region, are the main producers of organic soya. Further, it was pointed out that even American producers are aware of this fact. An interesting section of the website is on bioterrorism. As defined by NAGS, bioterrorism is the use of biological agents and toxins to destroy humans, food (including agricultural products), biological and ecological resources or ensuring control over these resources. It classifies the following types of bioterrorism: economic, ecological, food, genetic and agro-terrorism:

In Russia in recent years, a number of factors have made bioterrorism real. On the one hand a worrying geopolitical situation, massive migration and the lack of adequate border control. On the other, there is the lack of a technical base combined with poor materials for revisionary authorities, the decline of the national health system, corruption, and the lack of responsibility and competence among officials. Under these circumstances, it is necessary to inform members of the authorities and citizens through the media and educational institutions, create resources for prevention, timely identification and responses to the results of bio-terrorist attacks.

(NAGS, 2004)

On her TV programme, Sharoykina mentions the global conspiracy theory, which hypothesises that ‘the golden million of the richest people in the world’ aim to get rid of the majority of the population with ‘the introduction of GM food which would eventually end human survival’ (Russia.ru, 2009).

In one of its first media briefings, NAGS held a discussion in which Olga Razbash took part. She is a member of the previously mentioned NAGS partner, Hraniteli, and the Russian Regional Ecological Centre, another NGO relatively active in the debate. Before the briefing, Razbash took part in a meeting with NATO experts in Liege in May 2004 and concluded that after the 9/11 and Madrid attacks, the next target for terrorism would be food (NAGS, 2004).

Similar to Danube Soya, NAGS runs its own voluntary certification system called Biologicheski Bezopasno (which translates as ‘Safe in biological terms’). This voluntary labelling system is officially registered with the Russian state authorities and works with accredited laboratories which run tests. After testing, producers receive the right to use the label on packaging and convince consumers that the product is safe for human consumption. Throughout the validity period of certification, NAGS runs quality control over the certified products of its member companies. Members include Russian companies such as ‘Mihalichi’ (a family-run farm), an agro-firm called Katusha, Zarizino which is an eco project and Russequelle, a producer of mineral water (NAGS, unknown date).

An annual campaign organised by NAGS since 2012 serves as a protest against Monsanto and has followed the agenda of the Occupy Monsanto social movement ([KP, 2015](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cesprague%5CDesktop%5C31-0865_Gerasimova%5C01_from%20WFS%5C15031-0865-Ref%20Mismatch%20Report.docx#LStERROR_314)). In 2013, NAGS organised a petition entitled ‘No Monsanto. Russia without GMO!’, aimed at the collection of one million signatures to an open letter to President Putin (NAGS, 2013). In 2014, a flash mob called ‘Ludi I Zveri vs GMO’ (which translates as People and Animals against GMOs) was organised by NAGS and its partner NGO Pravda o ede. In 2015, the same alliance ran a meeting to support GM food-labelling. This time the venue was outside the US Embassy in Moscow. One activist, dressed as sweetcorn, tried to hand in the petition against GMO to the Embassy but was stopped at the gate (Gluten-free, 2015).

Danube Soya and the National Association for Genetic Safety are both examples of how NGOs fit into regional politics. Regionalism brings a new political understanding of the concept of food security. It refers to state capacity to provide enough safe food for citizens while supporting and protecting national agricultural producers from external competition and instability imposed by other global market players, particularly international agribusiness. An understanding of individual regions might also be amended to accommodate new political interests. Protectionist policy is still a reserved option for states such as Germany and Russia that have agricultural resources but are not the top international competitors. As both states are members of WTO, and Germany is a member of the EU, neither can fully implement protectionism, thus anti-GM rhetoric becomes a useful tool to excuse some protectionism. This also explains why both states support NGOs promoting anti-GM discourse and regional GM-free zones.

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