

Agricultural policy and law as reflected by Websites of Czech organic farmers

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Annotation: European integration is inseparably linked to the Common Agricultural Policy ("CAP") and information technologies ("IS/IT"). The growth strategy Europe 2020 encourages the EU to become a smart, sustainable and inclusive place where innovation supports inclusion, even within the sphere of agriculture and CAP addresses, farmers. Czech organic farmers and their Websites were tested in 2014 and in 2015 to assess their commitment to the Agricultural policy and law in the light of the recent scientific literature. The assessment of data was done while focusing on the attitude of Czech organic farmers and their Websites and how they reflect the agricultural policy and law. A battery of qualitative as well quantitative strategies was employed, along with Meta-Analysis processing. The evaluation was performed from various angles, relying on quantitative, rather than qualitative, methods, more on induction than deduction attempting to move to scientific objectification. The selected criteria targeted the domain names and Websites' content and interconnectivity, friendliness and the capacity to carry out various policies and tasks. Hypotheses were tested and casuistic observations were added. The result offers new insights in the unjustly underplayed arena, with a strong potential to contribute to a flourishing agribusiness. Although the semi-conclusions are yielded from a micro-sample, their homogeneity, direct feedback and back-up by published data suggest that Czech organic farmers understand the CAP and IS/IT, but they remain non-committal. Their Websites suggest their awareness about Agricultural policy and law and IS/IT and their low interest to get actively engaged. Due to the restricted sample, a further search and studies need to be done to analyze this asymmetry and to correct it to enhance the efficiency of the partnership between the EU and its farmers.

Key words: Common Agricultural Policy ("CAP"), Organic farmers, Websites.

JEL classification: M15, Q13, Q16, R11

1 Introduction

Post-Lisbon Europe has despite, or maybe even because of, the 'overcome' crises, many strong-points which need to be further effectively and efficiently developed. According to the new strategy launched in the EU in 2010 for the new decade ("Europe 2020"), these strengths include, among others, the talent and creativity of Europeans leading to innovations and a high quality agricultural sector (EC, 2010). Indeed, the success of modern European integration strongly depends upon the employment of innovations and an optimal advancement of the agriculture sphere, while the simultaneous combination of both is highly desirable. The hallmark of this trend is the Internet with its www composed by Websites, which are sets of related and connected Webpages located and served by domains around computers with an appropriate storage capacity, or similar Internet devices (Köhler and Arntd, 2011). According to the EU policy and law, especially each business from the EU should have or rent such a server, register a domain and attach Websites with Webpages carrying information and so enhance it's competitiveness in the cyber-world (Cvik and MacGregor, 2014). Czech organic farmers have the choice to take full advantage of modern IS/IT, especially Websites, to boost their activities and thus further advance the agricultural policy of the EU, as set by EU law, or to pass on it. Since not each and every farmer is computer

literate, they might not know that a host web server is a storage for a Website attached to a domain, while a domain name is mainly a word indicator of an IP resource (MacGregor, 2012), that the server space can be rented and the domain name registered for a few EUR annually, and that a Website can be created easily. There is a potential for an asymmetry of expectation and information emerges (MacGregor, 2014). The EU underlines the importance of IS/IT and of the sustainable development and pays attention to both pillars of the famous Common Agricultural Policy ("CAP"), production support and rural development, while farmers may be overwhelmed or at least reluctant (Cvik and MacGregor, 2014). Modern EU agricultural policies and law need the active engagement of all stakeholders in a manner going even beyond the principle of shared management (Peters, 2014) and the Internet is a great vehicle for it, especially if Websites are used (MacGregor, 2013). Innovations significantly impact the professional, social and private life in the EU (MacGregor, 2012) and are important factors for regional economic development and growth, but they are unequally distributed across different parts of the EU (Copus et al, 2008). The Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005 with its principles of assistance (Art.5) and partnership (Art.6) is an example of the bottom-up approach in the context of CAP and IS/IT, namely motivating all stakeholders to use appropriate Websites. In addition, Website presentations increase the competitiveness of farms and farmers (Šmejkalová, 2013). The static objective of the paper is to test the knowledge of Czech organic farmers about IS/IT and EU policy and law, and their interest in an active involvement in relation to domain names as titles (Huber and Hitzelberg, 2010) and the content of their Websites. The dynamic objective is to identify the evolution from 2014 to 2015 and possible new trends.

2 Materials and Methods

This paper represents a continuation of primary research, of which the first stage was completed and published in 2014 (Cvik and MacGregor, 2014). This second stage pursues the selection of material and methods for an investigation of Websites of a pre-selected homogenous group of Czech organic farmers as a representative micro-sample. A triad of sources, approaches and methods was selected of a primary as well as secondary nature – research, identification and reviews of published data (i), retrieving and assessing selected Websites (ii) and distributing, collecting and processing questionnaire replies (iii). Collected data and information are evaluated, based on quantitative analysis with an ad hoc qualitative complementing, and re-assessed in a comparative manner with respect to results and conclusions earned in 2014. A complex set of data is re-addressed by Meta-Analysis (Schmidt and Hunter, 2014). The 1st hypothesis assumes that Websites of pre-selected Czech organic farmers demonstrate their active endorsement of the CAP and its application (H1). The 2nd hypothesis assumes that deficiencies detected in 2014 were corrected in 2015 (H2).

3 Results and Discussion

EU agriculture needs to attain higher levels of production of safe, quality food, while preserving natural resources. This can be done exclusively in a competitive and viable agricultural sector operating within a properly functioning supply chain and which contributes to a thriving rural economy (EC, 2013). Since 70% of EU farms are less than 5 hectares in size, the cooperation (EC, 2014a) and use of IS/IT are vital. The famous pro-integration EU tandem, shaping EU law and policies, the Commission and the Court of Justice (Burley and Mattli, 1993) as well as other stakeholders know that this can hardly be achieved without effective

and efficient employment of IS/IT instruments by farmers in their business per se, as well in their cooperation. This is previewed by CAP, but is it previewed and materialized by farmers? The EU does not order Czech farmers to register domains under certain domain names, and to attach Websites with a particular content to become eager warriors for modern CAP and the post-Lisbon EU as such. Instead, the EU has spent a significant effort to prepare and offer a battery of methods and soft-instruments suggesting that such Websites should be win-win, i.e. beneficial for both the EU and Czech organic farmer. Is this true or a myth, is this reality or just an exercise in rhetoric? Has the situation changed from 2014 to 2015?

In 2014, 80% of Czech SMEs had Websites, but only 60% of Czech agrarian SMEs (ČSÚ, 2014), while considering that 62% Czech agrarian enterprises are small, 31% medium sized and 7% large, which generate 65-80 % of production (ČSÚ, 2014). Ultimately, the Czech agrarian SMEs must e-cooperate in order to growth in a smart and sustainable manner. A test of their perception and readiness in this respect can be qualitatively done, based on a homogenous sample. Thus, the same five Czech organic farmers as in 2014 were contacted with extended questionnaires and their replies, along with the current and past appearance of their Websites, were assessed. The original quintet included Miroslav Horut with www.biofarmaroznov.cz, Biofarm XXX, Biofarm Zeleny dvur with www.zelenydvur.cz, Yes Fresh s.r.o. with www.freshbedynky.cz and Biofarm YYY. In 2015, the first 4 provided feedback, i.e. the last Biofarm YYY failed to. Hence the data about a quartet of farms from 2014 and 2015 will be explored and projected to H1 and H2. The organic farm, Křížové pole – Doležalovi with <http://www.farmadolezal.cz/> is added. Due to inherent similarities in the size, operation and strategies of these five subjects, their Websites can constitute a micro-sample for an introductory case study. These five Websites are platforms oriented towards self-presentation and e-business, but not community and rural development. The first three Websites have not been changed at all while the fourth and fifth Websites have been sophisticatedly updated. This suggests that only Yes Fresh s.r.o. and Doležalovi are proactively employing IS/IT and it needs to be assessed based on data provided by the subjects via questionnaires in the light of the published literature.

The 1st examined farmer, Miroslav Horut, has one full time employee, focuses on quality dairy products and the dignity of their animal life. The 2nd examined farmer completed the questionnaires in 2014 and 2015 with a desire to stay anonymous. His family farm functions since 2011, does not have any employees and focuses on pork and beef breeding and honey production. Their Website is rather simple and provides merely basic data (Cvik and MacGregor, 2014). The questionnaire search about the 1st examined farm of M.Horut and the 2nd examined subject, XXX, generated the data indicated in Table 1.

Mr. Horout demonstrates an above average awareness about CAP and IS/IT as well as a readiness to work on his Website to help his agribusiness. He perceives CAP realistically and has not made any dramatic changes in his attitude, business and Website in the last year, with one important exception. He started to more intensively cooperate with other farmers. His can-do-attitude, eagerness to cooperate and clarity of his propositions regarding CAP make him an ideal candidate to be enrolled in pilot projects combining CAP and IS/IT. The anonymous XXX demonstrates an average awareness about CAP and IS/IT and a readiness to work hard on his Website to help his agribusiness. He perceives CAP realistically and has not made any dramatic changes in his attitude, business and Website in the last year with one important exception. He started to manage his Website by himself, but he reduced his cooperation with other farmers. He aims for diversification and appears to be inclined to give

up on common actions and rather wants to be completely independent and on his own. He has been losing faith in agricultural policy and its connection with IS/IT. This individualistic trend is pretty common for the Czech Republic where the traditional setting was discontinued due to the communistic regime and many Czech farmers struggle with the idea of a community led-rural development. This is a contribution to the myriad of “policy tails and analytical dogs” issues regarding rural development (Copus, 2014) and CAP in general.

Table 1. Questionnaire (combined 2014, 2015) –Biofarm Miroslav Horut and XXX

Question	Answer Horut	Answer XXX
Website since	2011 (Biofarm since 2001)	2014
Who selected the domain name	Website designer	Biofarmer
Who manages the Website	3 rd party	3 rd party in 2014, Biofarmer in 2015
Did you receive any public help with your www	No (disappointment re CAP application)	No (disappointment re CAP application)
Would you like to receive it	Yes	Yes
Cooperation with other farms	No in 2014, Yes in 2015	Yes in 2014, No in 2015
Links to other farms Websites	No	No
How do you perceive CAP and its importance	Positive and negative, advantages for big (!!)	More positives than negatives (still critical re CAP application)
What would you like to change	100 ha limit, amount of bureaucracy	Certain rules
Receiving funding support from the EU, reg.	EU and CZ support for employment	Only from EU (reluctance re CAP application)
Any strategic decision about www in 2014-15	No	No
General plans for future	More efficiency and speed for our work	More efficiency and diversity
Plans regarding www	No changes expected	No changes expected

Source: Own processing

The 3rd examined is the organic farm Zelený Dvůr located in Prague, which functions since 2006 and focuses on bio vegetables and animal breeding. Interestingly, the Website includes references to legislatively set bio certificates such as *Bio Produkt ekologického zemědělství*. The 4th examined is YesFresh, s.r.o. which sells boxes with Bioproducts named Fresh bedýnky. (Cvik and MacGregor, 2014). The questionnaire search about the 3rd examined and the 4th examined subjects generated the data indicated in Table 2.

The organic farmer from Zelený Dvůr demonstrates an awareness about IP law, CAP and IS/IT, and will to work hard on his Website to help his agribusiness. He perceives CAP positively and hasn't made any big changes in his attitude, business and Website. He gladly cooperates with other farmers and wants to deepen his specialization and to improve quality. He is grateful for CAP support and his can-do-attitude, eagerness to cooperate and the clarity of his propositions regarding CAP make him an ideal candidate for pilot projects combining CAP and IS/IT. No dramatic changes happened for the subject with the most developed Website,

Yes Fresh. Although e-presentation suggests professionalism, the champions - Yes Fresh and Biofarm Zelený dvůr do not use e-platforms for communication with the public administration and thus decline to use IS/IT to support public law goals. The added new subject, Doležalovi - beneficiary of the post-communistic land restitution and “emerging Davids” (Hockerts and Wüstenhagen, 2010) - manages to receive EU as well as state/region funding support, stated that their “Website is indispensable” for their Agribusiness and that e. g. they rely on Agri-tourism for which they get almost all clients via Website. This insight matches with published data about the importance of IS/IT (Di Domenico and Miller, 2012) for sustainable transformation (Hockerts and Wüstenhagen, 2010), and sustainable growth.

Table 2. Questionnaire (combined 2014, 2015) – Biofarm Zelený Dvůr and Fr. Bed.

Question	Answer Zelený Dvůr	Answer Fresh bedynky
Website since	2008	2009
Who selected the domain name	Biofarmer	Biofarmer
Who manages the Website	Biofarmer	Biofarmer
Did you receive any public help with your www	No (disappointment re CAP application)	No (disappointment re CAP application)
Would you like to receive it	Yes	Yes
Cooperation with other farms	Yes	Yes
Links to other farms Websites	No in 2014, Yes in 2015	Yes
How do you perceive CAP and its importance	Positive, especially because of dotation	Not key, we are no primary producers
What would you like to change...	Clearer and more just rules	No comments
Receiving funding support from the EU, reg.	Only from EU	No public support!!! (disappointment re CAP)
Any strategic decision about www in 2014-15	No	Yes, we completely changed www design
General plans for future	Focusing only on one animal type	No dramatic changes, keep working
Plans regarding www	Quality improvement, More detailed data	Keep working, our www is for us critical

Source: Own processing

All the answering farmers admit the semi-professional nature of their Websites and occasional improvisations as well as their wish to improve their employment of IS/IT in order to boost their agribusiness, and they vainly wait for more guidance and assistance within the appropriate policy and legal framework. They all basically agree upon CAP, but they are disappointed regarding its application and informally glossed their reluctance (see comments in parentheses). They want a simplification of CAP rules and more attractive and interactive

Website to get more clients and to learn more about them. These conclusions match with the Overview of CAP Reform 2014-2020 presented by the European Commission in 2013 (EC, 2013) and points already published regarding EU agrarian case studies, such as Spanish virgin oil <http://www.orolivesur.com/> (Carmona et al, 2012). The challenge to strike the right balance between effectiveness and efficiency is recognized by all stakeholders.

4 Conclusion

The agriculture sector has been at the center of modern European integration, and the desired growth strategy of the post-Lisbon EU relies on smart, sustainable and inclusive agribusiness supported by innovations in tangible and intangible forms. According to the perspective from above, natural synergy between the agribusiness and IS/IT should contribute towards the competitiveness and stability of the EU. These expectations can be successfully implemented and materialized only if an educated and active support of all stakeholders is obtained. Since an average European farmer has only 12 hectares of land (EC, 2014a) and an organic farmer even less, their e-cooperation is critical. The tested micro-sample of Websites and answers of Czech organic farmers suggests that there is a conceptual agreement and materialization discrepancy, i.e. farmers agree with goals but keep feeling not publicly supported. Both H1 and H2, i.e. the 1st hypothesis that Websites of pre-selected Czech organic farmers demonstrate their active support of the CAP and its application and the 2nd hypothesis that deficiencies diagnosed in 2014 were corrected in 2015, were based on the homogenous tested micro-sample rejected. There seems to be aborted opportunities in the setting of high as well low economic disparity (Rýsová, 2009), which are not in compliance with CAP and Europe 2020 objectives. Czech farmers agree upon both pillars of CAP and the EU focus on IS/IT, and understand them, but they are disappointed about how this is materialized. They want more transparency and simplification regarding CAP and IS/IT and a true partnership between EU and its farmers, not mere proclamations (EC, 2014b) and empty “fair deals” (EC, 2014a).

The detected semi-professionals and improvisations of Websites and complaints of farmers show that there is not such a bottom-up support of the EU agricultural policy and law as expected by the new EU programs, in individual as well as EU rural networking contexts (Peters and Gregory, 2014). Although testing 5 subjects is not conventionally accepted for statistical purposes, these Websites and comments match similar published data and show the level of disparity and the innovative engagement gap, which are definitely less significant than in other studies (Copus, 2008). Czech farmers belong to the large majority of the Czech SMEs having Websites (Asociace, 2013), but in a less intense manner (ČSÚ, 2014). Their good understanding of IS/IT, their endorsement of EU policy and law goals, their readiness to work on their Websites, their community reluctance and their calling for public assistance deserve to be further researched and studied. Future studies should analyze why, then, and how their endorsement and support of EU agricultural policy can be boosted by transparency steps and public support projects, e.g. Website coaching. If this is proven, then this constitutes a call to be answered for the sake of the mentioned partnership and the CAP in general.

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CONTENT

	Page
Plenary session – Keynote speakers	
The European Dairy Sector in a new Era	5
<i>Trevor Donnellan and Michael Keane</i>	
The challenges posed by price volatility in the EU dairy sector	20
<i>Declan O’Connor¹, Dennis Bergmann and Michael Keane</i>	
Parallel sessions	
Structural Changes in the Slovak Regional Agriculture	39
<i>Lubica Bartová and Veronika Konyová</i>	
Usability and Accessibility analysis of Czech agrarian portals	47
<i>Petr Benda, Martina Šmejkalová and Miloš Ulman</i>	
Wages in Czech Agricultural, Industrial and Construction Sectors	55
<i>Diana Bílková</i>	
Labour productivity in agriculture – value known or unknown?	64
<i>Ivana Boháčková and Jiří Mach</i>	
Legal Aspects of Agricultural Land in the Czech Republic	73
<i>Jana Borská and Eva Kadlecová</i>	
Agricultural policy and law as reflected by Websites of Czech organic farmers	82
<i>Eva Daniela Cvik and Radka MacGregor Pelikánová</i>	
Technological Progress in European Pork Production	90
<i>Lukáš Čechura and Heinrich Hockmann</i>	
Risk management of rural municipalities as a limit of their basic self-governing functions	99
<i>Jaroslav Čmejrek and Jan Čopík</i>	
Positive Disparities in Micro Regions	109
<i>Ludmila Dömeová and Andrea Jindrová</i>	
Predictive ability of financial health assessment in agriculture	117
<i>Kristýna Dvořáková</i>	
Model AGRO-2014 and problem discrimination of Czech food producers	126
<i>Ivan Foltýn, Olga Štiková and Ilona Mrhálková</i>	

Subsidies and Technical Efficiency of Large-Scale Farms in Poland	135
Justyna Góral	
Provision of Public Goods in Czech Agriculture	145
Pavína Hálová, Zdeňka Žáková Kroupová, Michaela Havlíková, Lukáš Čechura and Michal Malý	
Availability of food on the Czech market for specific groups of customers and the quality of life	159
Aleš Hes, Daniela Šálková, Lenka Kučírková and Marta Regnerová	
A general appraisal of empowerment in Peru: A case study of Condoray and its rural promoters	168
Angie Higuchi and Eduardo Zegarra	
Cost ratio and profit ratio of sugar beet production in production conditions	176
Ivan Holúbek, Roman Serenčěš and Žuzana Poláková	
Deterministic Decision Making in Agricultural Production	184
Jan Hron, Tomáš Macák and Pavel Sládek	
Rural Community Schools in the Czech Republic and their Activities within the Context of Rural Development	191
Jakub Husák and Šárka Hádková	
Corn and soy in Russia: the latest fad or a new cash cow?	199
Sergey Chetvertakov	
EU Legal Regulation of State Aid In Agriculture - Selected Issues	208
Martin Janků	
Taking the managerial decisions at the enterprise in the age of agriculture globalization in Russian Federation	216
Stanislava Kontsevaya, Ludmila Khoruziy, Irina Kharcheva, Irina Makunina and Kostina Raisa	
Development of Rural Communities and the Factors Forming Local Political Representation	224
Radek Kopřiva and Sylvie Kobzev Kotásková	
Factors influencing the use by farmers of disaster loans - empirical research	232
Agnieszka Kurdyś-Kujawska and Anna Rosa	
Break Even Point in Circular Economy of Biofuels	240
Zdeněk Linhart and Vladimír Hömig	