



## **'We Want Farmers' Markets!' Case Study of Emerging Civic Food Networks in the Czech Republic**

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the article is to provide an empirical insight into non-conventional food initiatives in the Czech Republic, as representative of a post-Socialist country in Central/Eastern Europe, and more specifically to provide an answer to the questions of how the citizen-driven food networks in the Czech Republic evolve and what forms they take. The article presents detailed findings from a case study of farmers' markets, which have been spreading all over the country since 2010 as a result of the strong, new engagement of consumer groups that first stood up for farmers' markets in Prague, and later in other large cities. The case study employs different data collection techniques in order to describe and explore the initiative. Primary data for the study have been collected through semi-standardized interviews with organizers of the farmers' markets, engaged farmers and local stakeholders, in order to understand the factors that have enabled this initiative to grow and challenge the dominant food networks. The study explores critically the active role of consumers in the transition of the current food networks, the mechanisms of the transitional process and the transformative potential of the initiative with regard to the sustainability of food production.

### **Introduction**

In line with other developed countries, the Czech Republic is experiencing changes in the field of food production and consumption. Due to the globalization and Europeanization processes, these changes are similar in many ways, yet different in others. This article focuses on changes in the agri-food regime in the Czech Republic, which are driven by the activities of consumers who are engaged in initiatives conceptualized as civic food networks.

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Particular attention is paid to the farmers' markets (FMs) that have developed recently into a unique form, viewed in this study as an example of consumer-driven initiatives contributing to transition processes. FMs as such existed in the Czech Republic before 1989 (i.e. during the Communist regime) and throughout the 1990s formed a distribution channel that functioned in parallel with shop sales. However, the transformative potential of this alternative, related to its capacity to change the current system of food production and consumption into a more sustainable model, was marginal. Most of the former markets (in better cases) simply included the direct sales of selected products and, in worse cases, only resellers were present to offer conventional products without any additional value. At the beginning of 2010, a new wave of FMs emerged to change this practice fundamentally. These new FMs were founded due to the 1. initiative of non-governmental organizations (often cooperating with municipalities) that 2. came up with their own conception of the market and negotiated purposefully with selected food suppliers, who 3. offered products very different from conventional (industrialized) goods. Such features are delivering radical changes to the previous food marketing practices in the Czech Republic. Within the Czech context the emergence of the FM was a break point. Markets quickly became popular and spread all over the country. Considering the fact that none of the previously existing initiatives within the alternative food networks had made such rapid progress, it is important to answer the questions 'how did it happen and what factors enabled FMs – radically different from the dominant practice – to become so successful?'

A specific goal of this article is to describe the emergent transition of and explain the role of civic food networks, which are considered here as the main driving force for the change processes. In this type of initiative, as was generally pointed out by Renting, the groups of consumers engaged in the organization of the new FMs are stepping over their role and entering into very new relationships with producers (Renting, this issue). The emergence of the FMs stems from the collective actions of the more or less formalised groups that, for this purpose, often collaborate with representatives of the local administration. The FM as a concept is accentuating the process-based quality of products (pointing out their origin and the methods of food production) and aims at being different from the products distributed through conventional marketing channels (such as supermarkets). The studied initiative has its origin in an urban rather than a rural setting. Due to this, the networks of producers, consumers and other actors are no longer formed 'from farm to fork', as in the case of the standard short food supply chains, but rather 'from fork to farm', since the new shape of the food network is created more by consumers. Such a situation also requires a new approach of researchers: if we want to understand the dynamics of such a network, as was pointed out by Oosterveer (2012), it is crucial to start the study with the 'empowered', engaged and demanding consumers and their preferences. Regarding the focus of this article, it is possible to modify this requirement by looking at the empowered, engaged groups of consumers, who display their actorship collectively through civic society organizations (most often civic associations or non-profit organizations).

The phenomenon of the FMs is studied in this work with the use of the transition theory that has been traditionally applied for understanding socio-technical transitions (Geels and Schot, 2010; Darnhofer, 2011). The study includes a case of an emerging transition or 'transition in the making' (Elzen et al., 2011), rather than a completed transition, which are long-term processes spanning several decades

(Darnhofer, 2011). For this purpose, the multilevel perspective was utilized, which is assumed to capture the development processes and identify factors that facilitate the success of the initiative. The first section defines the key concepts of the transition theory, such as niche, regime and landscape factors. Subsequently, development of the alternative initiative in the Czech Republic is described, from the diachronic and synchronic perspectives. First, the development of the niche initiatives over time (diachronic analysis) is discussed, with regard to the engagement of consumers and their cooperation with farmers. Thereafter follows a detailed investigation into the origin, form, logic and governance model of FMs at the present time (synchronic analysis). Finally, the implications of the initiative and the main findings based on the presented case study are discussed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The case study presented in the text was conducted in relation to the exploration of the transitional process occurring in the agri-food regime. This work has applied the concepts of transitional theory as created in the last decade in Europe (Grin et al., 2010) and used for the analysis of food production (Spaargaren et al., 2012). The theory of transition is utilized for understanding the change processes that occur within a specific context (time and space), thereby focusing on the actors taking part in the processes. These actors may share their stakes, or their interests may be contradictory. According to Elzen et al. (2008) the gist of transition is the innovation of the existing system that is represented by a specific framework of rules, approaches, social relations and technological infrastructure, known in sum as the regime. A regime can be put under pressure due to inner forces or due to the changes that have their origins in the external setting. The long-term external factors that shape the functions of the regime are conceptualized as landscape factors. A key role in the study of the transition process is played by innovation, which appears as novelties, creating what is known as niches. Niches are usually regarded as the 'seeds of change'. These three concepts (regime, landscape factors and niche) create the intertwined layers of the multilevel perspective model.

The first applications of the transition theory (conducted by Schot et al., 1994; Geels, 2002) were strongly inspired by systemic theory. Social actions and behaviour were seen as one of the dimensions of the socio-technical regime and as such were not given primary attention. This has been criticized by Spaargaren et al. (2012), who strived to build a theory that would be more 'agency inclusive'. Inspired by the theory of structuration, he proposes to use 'practices' as the unit of analysis instead of 'systems', in order to enhance the fact that 'transitions are (wo)man-made phenomena, although not under the circumstances of their choice and without any guarantee with respect to the outcomes' (Spaargaren et al., 2012, p. 9). This approach acknowledges that the technological infrastructure, cultural patterns and empowered social relations, as well as other social structures, form inevitable limits for the agency of actors. However, at the same time, it states that the processes that are created by the actions of agents shall be given appropriate analytical weight.

The main dilemma of this modified theory is thus included in the question of how not to overlook the central role of the social actors in the transition process and, at the same time, to acknowledge the complexity and multidimensional character of the processes that develop simultaneously as a result of the social and technological co-evolution. In order to capture the transition process that occurs at different

levels and on a different scale, a research tool called MLP (multilevel perspective) was developed (Kemp, 1994; Kemp et al., 2001; Geels, 2005). This tool draws on the above-mentioned elements of the model to include the niche, regime and landscape factors based on 'nested hierarchy' (Geels, 2002, p. 1261). In order to accentuate the importance of the social actions in the transition process, it is possible to characterize the three levels with regard to their extent of institutionalization, as proposed by Spaargaren et al. (2012). The extent of institutionalization is responsible for the stability of social interactions over time. The innovations (less-institutionalized solutions) attempt to change the organizational principles that are included in the regime level (representing a relatively more institutionalized system).

From this point of view, innovation in the area of food production and consumption can be seen as an advent of changes that can (but may not) be expressed in the existing regime. Ideas that are included in an alternative initiative are new, often radically different and therefore unknown to the actors that operate in the established setting. The niche in this way responds to regime weaknesses and demonstrates new possibilities for future development. It is obvious that not all innovations are able to become embedded in the regime and bring about changes that are introduced to the market. This suggests that one of the key points of the analysis are the processes through which practices at niche level interact with those at regime level, and shape the course of system innovation (Smith, 2007) by creating an anchorage of the alternative initiative in the regime (Elzen et al., 2008).

Analysis of the transition process is most often focused on the innovations (i.e. the niche level), and the ways in which the niche interacts with the regime – for example, see empirical applications by Raven et al. (2010) or Spaargaren et al. (2012). Analogically, other studies focus on the level of regime, its established practices, procedures and technologies that are conducted by engaged regime actors. The main challenge is to explain how inner institutions of the regime, based on mutual ties and, in many cases, also on a strong lock-in mechanism, preserve stability and prevent changes in the system. The conceptual focus of the FMs in this study is not on the internal processes of the niche level (construction of novelties), but rather on the interactions between the niche and the regime, which will help us to understand how innovation is becoming embedded in the regime structure, how it gains momentum and delivers eventual changes in the existing practices within food production and consumption.

## Methods Used

The case study on FMs was conducted as a part of the FarmPath project. The data were collected during winter 2011 and spring 2012. It included an extensive document study and semi-standardized interviews with organizers of the FMs and representatives of other engaged groups. The selection of the people interviewed was based on purposive sampling, which is typical of the qualitative research approach. The members interviewed represented different groups of actors who played key roles in the development of the initiative. Major attention was paid to the organizers of the FMs (key collective actors of the emerging civic food networks), policymakers (facilitating development of the initiative) and farmers (innovating food production practices). Altogether, 16 interviews were conducted (seven farmers' market organizers, seven farmers, and two representatives of the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture). In accordance with general recommendations (see Berg, 2007, p. 95), the interviews included a set of predetermined questions asked in

a systematic and consistent order, related to the organization of the FMs, the goals of the initiative and their outcomes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed qualitatively with the use of nVivo software.

### **Description of the Incumbent Regime and the Landscape Factors**

Unconventional food initiatives establish niches that experiment with innovative approaches. In order to understand how these novelties challenge the dominant practices, it is important to describe the logic and content of the incumbent regime they want to break into. The dominant food production and consumption regime is represented in the Czech Republic by large retail chain stores owned by transnational corporations. Over time, the established regime has created a powerful lock-in mechanism that prevents change and, to some extent, also the development of unconventional initiatives.

The main reason for this situation were the technological and societal trends reaching back to the early 1990s. With economic transformation, the previously established retail sector collapsed. Due to the growing consumer demand, the market was quickly penetrated by new foreign companies. The first supermarket was opened in 1991 by Ahold (Fuchs et al., 2005), retail store networks rapidly expanded and soon resulted in tough competition among retailers. In 1993, the market share of the 10 major retail companies was 7%, in 1999 it was almost 33%, and currently it reaches approximately 66% (Skála, 2007). The vast majority of food purchases are made in the stores of these large retail chains. It is estimated that hypermarkets are the main shopping points for 43% of Czech households, supermarkets take up about 15% and discount stores 25% (Incoma, 2011a). These purchasing patterns are in accordance with the high penetration of hypermarkets in the Czech Republic. According to the new statistics, there are 268 hypermarkets in the Czech Republic (i.e. 26 hypermarkets per 1 million inhabitants), connected to areas inhabited by 90% of the total population of the country (iDNES, 2012). It is estimated that, by the end of the year 2012, the number of hypermarkets in the Czech Republic will reach 300, which ranks the Czech Republic among the countries with the most dense networks of hypermarkets in Europe. This situation clearly illustrates the dominance of the industrial regime in the Czech Republic, which, at the same time, has hindered the development of alternative food initiatives.

The powerful position of the large retail chain stores was supported by ineffectual regulation in the past and a generally weak institutional framework that has its origin in the liberal era of the early 1990s. The new purchasing opportunities created by these stores in that period were often seen as a symbol of economic growth and affluence. The position and role of supermarkets, as well as the impacts on food supply chains, were not critically reflected in either public or academic discourses. The first critical opinions were formulated by the antiglobalization movement in the late 1990s, which discussed the growing economic power of corporations (Kozeluh, 2010), and the Czech government has passed only recently the 'Act on Significant Market Power and its Abuse' (Act No. 395/2009 of 9 September 2009), which is intended to limit the position of transnational corporations and to reduce the pressure put on their trading partners (mainly the producers and processors).

Despite the fact that there are no studies to evaluate systematically how Czech consumers view the quality of the food offered by supermarkets, public discourse reveals that consumers are becoming more concerned about this issue, particularly

after several scandals that undermined their trust in food quality. In addition, a recent comparison with other countries has revealed that supermarkets in the Czech Republic can 'afford' to sell food products of a lower quality at higher prices than in foreign branches of the stores (Pospěchová, 2011). It would be an exaggeration to state that such incidents could result in a significant outflow of consumers from supermarkets, undermining the dominance of the incumbent regime actors, but it is very likely that the negative experience has made Czech consumers more sensitive to the issue of food quality and attracted their attention to the alternatives they had overlooked before.

Despite the stability of the incumbent regime, its development has also been affected by external forces, conceptualized as landscape factors. One of the most important has been the rising awareness of consumers about the process-based qualities of food products, as already described in Western European countries (Holt and Reed, 2006). Fierce competition among the retail chain stores, together with the industrial logic of production, put constant pressure on the food quality offered in supermarkets. Only recently, have the large retail chain stores in the Czech Republic started to differentiate between food products and introduced their own premium brands of food products. This strategy can be seen as a response to the Czech consumers' turn towards quality (Murdoch and Miele, 2004), which essentially followed the patterns already known from Western Europe. However, the incumbent regime, due to its intrinsic logic, was able only partially to satisfy the new kind of market demand and through this has created an opportunity for the new development of alternative food initiatives.

### **Establishing Alternatives to the Existing Regime**

During the last decade, several models of non-conventional food initiatives have appeared in the Czech Republic that match widely known examples of the alternative food networks (Renting et al., 2003; Venn, et al. 2006). All of these initiatives reconfigure innovatively the relationships between producers and consumers (Marsden et al., 2000), and respond directly to the weaknesses of the incumbent regime of food production. The development of these initiatives in the Czech Republic was gradual, yet most of them did not complete the pre-developmental phase and did not become engaged in the potential take-off phase to break through. Regarding the transition process, it is still interesting to explore what kind of initiatives emerged, how they functioned and what aspects of the regime they aimed to innovate. Key aspects of the initiative are summarized in Table 1.

#### *Organic Certification Scheme*

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the organic sector has developed systematically. Due to the absence of a tradition of organic farming in Communist Czechoslovakia, the sector was built 'from top to bottom' on a formalized basis. The decisive element for the development of this sector were the subsidies introduced in 1998 (Brozova, 2011), which resulted in the rapid growth of the land registered in the organic system (MZe, 2011). However, the fast growth of the organic sector opened up two issues. First, it appeared that support of this kind led directly to the increase in the number of organic farmers and the proportion of organically farmed land in the Czech

**Table 1.** Key features of the alternative food initiatives in the Czech Republic.

	Start	Geographical scale	Innovated aspects of the incumbent regime	Involvement of consumers in development of the initiative
Organic certification scheme	1990	National	Reducing environmental impacts, alternative food quality	Very Low
Farm gate sales	1990s	National	Face-to-face interaction, alternative food quality	Low
Box schemes/home deliveries	2008	Regional (several regions)	Alternative food quality, localization of production	Medium
New farmers' markets	~2009	National	Face-to-face interaction, alternative food quality, localization of production	High
Community-supported agriculture (CSA)	~2009	Regional (several regions)	Alternative food quality, social responsibility, localization of production	High
Community gardens/Urban gardening	~2011	Local (large cities: Prague, Brno)	Social networking, localization of production	Very High

Republic, but did not bring more organic food to the customers (MZe, 2010). The reason for this situation was the lack of certified organic processing facilities and also the low consumer demand for organic food that remained beyond consumer interest. The second issue was concerned with the actual transformative potential of the organic initiative in the Czech context. One could assume that many of the farms joining the organic scheme were motivated mainly by economic reasons, without many ties to the organic ideology, which potentially threatened the stability of the newly established organic sector. Empirical investigations produced evidence that Czech organic farmers take various approaches to organic practice and only a portion of them can be regarded as those who purposefully contribute to the shift of the agricultural regime towards a more sustainable mode (Zagata, 2009, 2010).

Regarding the size of the sector, the organic certification scheme is among the most significant alternative initiatives. The scheme represents a typical example of the extended short food supply chain (Renting et al., 2003). Development of the initiative is shaped mostly by the formal institutional framework, which made the initiative grow out of the niche. The organic sector initiative is mentioned in the overview due to the fact that it represents a starting point for other alternative initiatives. Due to the historical context, the organic sector in the Czech Republic has been designed from 'top to bottom' and the role of consumers in this initiative has been relatively small.

### *Farm Gate Sales*

In spite of the fact that it is not possible to estimate exactly the size of this distribution channel, it can be assumed that direct sales have been developing simultaneously with other examples of the alternative initiatives. According to the figures of the Association of Private Farming, the main items distributed through direct sales

are fruit and vegetables, grains, dairy products, live animals, meat and selected processed products, such as must and dried fruits (SMA, 2011). Generally, it is estimated that this marketing model does not have a high market share. The main reason for this situation is the high concentration and specialization of the primary sector (low number of enterprises that process products on farms) and also the strict hygienic rules that require high investments from potential, direct-selling food producers.

Recently, the professional organization associating small and middle-sized farms has put a lot of effort into weakening the power of the 'hygienic-bureaucratic regime' (Marsden, 2006) in order to enable farmers to additionally process, valorize and sell their production directly. It is assumed that direct sales were also very important for the development of the organic sector in its early stages (1998–2005), when inadequately developed distribution channels for organic products made interested consumers approach farmers directly. With the growth of the organic sector, certified products started to be distributed by specialized shops and, later on (in 2007–2008), also by supermarkets. Current statistics show that about 5% of organic products is sold on farms and the vast majority – almost 70% – is already distributed by large retail chain stores (Hrabalová, 2010).

#### *Box Schemes and Home Deliveries*

Starting in 2008, a new initiative appeared in the Czech Republic that was already more based on the engagement of consumer-citizens. This initiative was again related to the organic sector. The Ministry of Agriculture published a guidebook that describes how to start up and manage a box scheme for the distribution of organic products (Vaclavik, 2008). The inclination towards organic sectors stemmed from the engagement of organic consumer groups and environmental organizations. In 2010, a new Internet portal was created to assist with creating box communities (Biospotřebitel, 2010). At that time, the official list of participating subjects included 31 organizations. It is noteworthy that almost half of these subjects (45%) were the farmers themselves, who most probably used this channel for widening their direct-marketing opportunities. The remaining proportion of organizers was represented by individual traders (25%) and informal consumer groups (25%) – called 'biokluby' (organic clubs). The enlisted groups of consumers were often related to various civic organizations, which included the support for sustainable production and consumption among their activities.

In comparison to the above-mentioned initiatives, box schemes are based on a much higher involvement of consumers and the initiative itself includes a wider range of actors. Box schemes gained a new impetus after the success of the FMs in 2010. Recently, a new interactive portal was established (<<http://www.bedyanky.cz>>, accessed 25 August 2012). The main innovation is the fact that the portal allows users not only to draw information about participating producers from prepared lists, but also to form their own new networks. These networks (groups) are called 'cooperatives' and can be established by producers as well as consumers. A detailed inspection of the currently existing groups shows that there are about 100 active cooperatives, offering more than 300 sites all over the country where food is traded. Approximately one third of these co-ops are operated by farmers and two thirds of the groups are managed by consumers. If one compares these figures with the situation in 2008 (see above), one notes that the proportion of farmers in the scheme has slightly decreased, while the activity of consumers in the scheme has increased.



### *New Farmers' Markets*

The new FM emerged in 2010. Regarding the previous development of the alternative initiative, this was a breakthrough event. FMs were initiated and driven by the activities of civic groups (sometimes in collaboration with local public administration), whereby they put into practice their concepts of local food production and consumption. The markets gained a mass character and the original model (based on collaboration of civic groups and local farmers) was replicated in different regions all over the Czech Republic. The success of the FMs opened up a new window of opportunity for other unconventional initiatives that arose from the new concerns of consumers about food quality. The emergence of the FMs represents a unique phenomenon and it is analysed in detail as a case of the emerging transition driven by the civic participation of consumers.

### *Community-supported Agriculture*

In 2009–2010, a free association (including approximately 50 consumers and 4 farmers) was established in an attempt to launch a project based on the work of the French AMAP movement (Valeska, 2012). The project attracted attention after 2011 and gained new momentum. Organizers of this initiative aim purposefully to promote cooperation with farmers and create a relationship that is based on a partnership. At this time, several experimental groups can be found in large cities that put into practice community-supported agriculture in Prague, Brno and also in Northern Moravia (Fiserova, 2012; Malikova, 2012). These projects are run solely by civic associations (active in the environmental movement), drawing inspiration from Western Europe (Frankova, 2012). Despite the relatively high level of attention attracted by these projects, the number of participating actors remains fairly low, which limits the transformative potential of this initiative in the Czech context.

### *Community Gardens/Urban Gardening*

In Spring 2012, the Czech media referred to the very first urban garden project located in the centre of Prague as Prazelenina. Looking at the size and scope of this project, it is obvious that the goals are of a social and cultural nature. At approximately the same time, another project, a community garden, was launched in the semi-urban area of Prague (Kom Pot, 2012). This project is run by a civic organization that rented the land that is now offered for growing vegetables to interested members of the association. It is estimated that the selected plot of land could be used by up to 50 families. As one may realize, this initiative, which is again new in the Czech context, shifts the role of the consumer even further. The project relies not only on engaged consumers cooperating with producers, but here the consumers are at the same time those who are producing the food. The consumers are in this way becoming 'prosumers' (more by Schermer, 2011).

## **Emerging Transition**

### *Origins of the Farmers' Market Initiative*

The FMs emerge as a new unconventional initiative that has been driven by the civic sector. Unlike previous initiatives, FMs have increased on a massive scale. In this

way, the initiative represents a radical departure from the previous practices and it is important and interesting to explore in detail how it has emerged and why this initiative has become much more successful than the others.

The beginning of the new FMs described in this study dates back to 2009–2010. The initiative has been driven from its inception by groups of consumers. Some organizers of the new FMs already had some experience from other previous unconventional initiatives (included in the overview above), most of them came from cities without any previous direct professional relationship to agriculture. The very first new FM was organized in autumn 2009 on the outskirts of Prague; however, it was recognized only by local residents. The market was established by a pair of organizers who approached selected farmers and advertised the opening of the market to local people. Their concepts of the market were relatively strict: they only allowed the sales of vegetables and fruit produced in the Czech Republic, regional food products, Czech food of distinguished quality, quality meat products (produced without mechanically separated meat), Czech fish and Czech flowers (<http://www.ceskyfarmarskytrh.cz/pro-trhovce>, accessed 10 September 2012). The market was held in an urban district of Prague with about 2,500 inhabitants. Such a setting was, on the one hand, advantageous to the organization of the market at this early stage and, on the other hand, the market did not extend beyond its local character.

Between 2009 and 2010, civic associations increased their pressure on local authorities to establish markets in central districts of Prague. In February 2010, a new Facebook community was set up, entitled 'We want Farmers' Markets in Prague!', with the goal of establishing a FM to allow customers to 'buy fresh food directly from Czech farmers'. In March 2010, one of the large FMs was held in Prague. According to the experience of the organizers, it was very difficult at that time to find farmers to participate in the market. There was no evidence that the concept would work and success of the project was uncertain, as was mentioned by the directly involved organizers:

'Nobody knew how many people would show up, nobody knew whether people would be interested... But they [Council of the Prague District] said, "OK, we will provide some funds to give it one trial run and then we will see". But farmers did not believe it, they thought that nobody would buy [farmers' food products], they were sceptical because of the higher prices of their products and consumers who were used to going to supermarkets... They thought it would not work, so we had to cajole them... and the rental for them was free' (interview 2 – FM organizer).

Contrary to expectations, the newly set up FM was extremely popular – it was visited by 15 000 people in one day. This unique experience changed the minds of farmers and consumers, as well as of the local authorities. It became evident that the sale of food – different from the offers of the incumbent regime – has enormous potential, which opened up an opportunity for a take-off of the initiative. Shortly afterwards, new FMs at another three sites in the city centre were opened. Those markets were also organized by civic associations together with the local council. Other city districts of Prague followed suit, supporting the creation of their own FMs, which they also managed. According to one of the organizers, the feasibility study for launching FMs in Prague had already been created in 2007; however, the technological concept of the market was not able to be anchored until 2010, when organizers received

political support for the project within the framework of the political elections that were held in autumn 2010 (FM organizer 4).

From spring to autumn 2010, FMs were being established, using the original model: the key organizer of the market was either a civic association or a municipality that approached selected farmers and negotiated with them about sales. The well-promoted markets were attended by thousands of consumers. The FM concept proved its economic viability and the initiative created a technological anchorage in the regime: it was possible to buy fresh food not only in supermarkets, but also at the new FMs that had become popular. Concerning the economic size of the initiative, it was estimated that the total turnover of the FMs in 2010 was about CZK 1 billion and, in 2011, the turnover doubled (finance.cz, 2011).

FMs were at first set up in large cities and later (in the next season of 2011) also in smaller towns. In some regions, market organizers managed to set up entire networks of FMs operated by one organizer in several towns. Some pioneer organizers of the FMs shared their knowledge and selectively assisted with organizing markets in other regions (interviews 1, 2, 5). Despite the obvious competition between some organizers, a network of actors, who made the initiative visible to consumers, was gradually established. At the end of 2011, FMs of this kind existed in more than 200 towns all over the Czech Republic, with about 40 markets being located in Prague. The growth of the initiative has resulted in a range of various forms of the FM, which poses the question: What should a FM be like? More specifically: How must the market be organized in order to meet its original purpose and goal?

#### *Established Concept of a Farmers' Market*

The FMs that were established in 2010 had an organized character. This means that the markets were not created spontaneously by farmers, but were a concept created by progressive representatives of the civic sector and/or representatives of municipalities. Some organizers stated that the FM is a 'marketing brand' (interview 2), as it has its specific propositions offered to customers. The common goal of the organizers was to set up an alternative marketing channel that would enable the distribution of non-conventional food products, different from the quality provided by the industrial regime. The difference between the quality of the FM and the conventional regime was an oft-mentioned theme among FM organizers:

'Everything is shiny in the supermarket, but after 10 years, people decided that they would also like something different... they started to understand that there is no point to shopping at [retail chain stores] Tesco, Albert, Lidl' (interview 2 – FM organizer).

'We do it because we want to offer people an alternative, so they don't have to buy food only in supermarkets' (interview 5 – FM organizer).

'Food at the farmers' market must be 100% local [i.e. Czech] and cannot be available in a retail chain store... I mean supermarkets and hypermarkets' (interview 1 – FM organizer).

The organizers of the markets are key actors in the initiative, because they design the structure of the markets, create networks with producers, invite them to the markets, set quality standards and also control them, promote the events and approach customers. This fact has also been recognized from the farmers' perspective, as one of

them stated that 'it is in the hands of the organizers' (interview 14). With the boom of FMs, a discussion was sparked as to whether there should be some universal standards for the organizers. In 2011, the Ministry of Agriculture coordinated a discussion with representatives of the markets about this issue. Their discussion resulted in a set of codified rules (Codex of Farmers' Markets). The Codex explicitly articulates support for small and middle-sized farmers, repeats the definition of quality based on fresh and local food and states that the sellers on the markets should be those who produce the given food. The latter point was intended to prevent resellers, who cannot provide an authentic relationship between the food producer and consumer. The rules included in the Codex were prepared by the major representatives of the sector (including about 10 subjects), who in this created a significant institutional anchorage of the initiative. Despite the fact that all the organizers address consumers who are concerned about alternative food quality, the actual designs of the FMs in reality vary in many aspects.

The design of the markets and their structure is usually derived from the personal values of individuals or groups that are in charge of organizing the FMs. Despite the fact that these forms have not been mapped systematically to produce an exact classification of the markets, it is possible to identify qualitatively a few traits that they have in common. The vast majority of the markets aim to offer fresh food, which entails mainly seasonal vegetables and fruit produced in the Czech Republic. In this aspect the niche challenges the industrial regime, which does not cooperate with small producers. The processed food offered at markets is supposed to have an additional value in terms of quality ingredients and specialized (artisan, not industrialized) production methods. Specific definitions are applied to meat quality. Farmers are not usually required to offer meat of organic quality, but it again needs to be different from the conventional production. Therefore meat from slow-growing breeds of chickens or special cattle breeds such as Angus are on offer at markets (interview 1).

One of these aspects concerns the relationship between producer and consumer. A major innovation of the FMs is that they create an authentic relationship that does not exist within the industrial regime of production. A FM requires small producers who are able to provide quality food, different from the industrial regime. At the same time, it is assumed that consumers will have the opportunity of meeting the farmers face to face, as was pointed out by the FM organizers:

'People do not want to buy indifferent goods, the food that will just feed you. Farmers' markets give them a history, you can see the people who produced the food, and you know that in two weeks you will see them again and you can tell them whether it tasted good or not... But when you go to [retail chain store] Billa then what do you do?' (interview 5 – FM organizer).

'We have our own certification that guarantees the farmer was approved, his goods have a clear origin and I can be sure that this is not a reseller... At the same time, we keep to the rule that the vast majority of food must be Czech' (interview 4 – FM organizer).

However, a producer's work does not always allow him/her to carry out the farm work and, at the same time, to attend the markets. This creates the problematic question of how to provide consumers with authentic contact with producers. Some organizers thus allow producers not to be present at the market, as long as it is possible for them to be substituted by another knowledgeable person, despite the risk that

this practice could destroy the friendly working relationship between producer and consumer.

The gist of the innovation provided by the FMs is the alternative food quality. However, 'quality' is a contested term. Some organizers accentuate product-based quality, a wide assortment (including products from abroad) and new experiences for consumers. Promotions of these markets often include recipes for new meals and culinary specialities, because consumers 'are mostly interested in the taste of the products' (interview 2). Other FMs put more emphasis on the process-based quality of products, their origin and the impacts of their production on humans and the environment, since 'quality food does not mean that it looks good and tastes good, but it also matters how it was produced and processed' (interview 1).

The mass popularity of the FMs in the Czech Republic relies apparently on the product-based food quality or the process-based qualities different from organic methods, because a lot of consumers would be 'discouraged by organics' (interview 8), because they view them as 'terribly expensive' (interview 2) and 'did not find their way to them' (interview 4). The main emphasis is thus placed on those qualities embedded in food that are in opposition to the dominant regime. In the Czech context, this mainly includes the notion of local and fresh food products with a transparent origin, i.e. the motives that mobilized consumers in the beginning of the initiative. The interpretation of what counts as 'local' is flexible. For most organizers, 'local' means 'Czech'. This gives them enough flexibility to offer a wide range of products that are beyond the production capacities of regional producers, but still distinguish the farmers' market products from the globalized food sold in supermarkets.

Another important aspect is related to the venues of the FMs. The first markets were established in city centres. In many cases, these events helped to revive public spaces. With the growth of the initiative that occurred, there was pressure to organize markets in other venues as well. An antipode to the FMs organized in city centres became the market set up in supermarket car parks. The organizers of these markets argued that not all cities had a suitable public space in the city centre and, since it was among their goals to provide convenient purchasing to consumers, they decided to organize the markets differently (interview 5). This step away from the general point of view illustrates a symbiotic interaction between the niche and the regime. Conventional food stores in this way had a chance to profit from the niche, as well as the FM organizers who could address mainstream customers arriving to do their shopping at the supermarket. Organizers of the FMs who used this strategy functioned within the initiative as hybrid actors (engaged in the niche as well as the regime networks) and efficiently anchored the initiative in the regime structures.

The new FMs in the Czech Republic are organized by three categories of actors – NGOs, municipalities and private organizations. After the technological anchorage of the initiative and its institutionalization among Czech consumers, the concept of the FM proved its economic viability. In the most attractive areas, tough competition started about who would organize these markets. Especially in Prague, where the markets were at first established by civic organizations, some projects are currently being put under pressure by local councils who have the ambition to take over these markets. Anchoring of the initiative in the regime thus affects not only the regime structure, but also the alternative initiative itself. However, so far there is no systematic evidence whether and how markets differ among different groups of organizers and whether the original goals could in this way somehow be undermined. It is possible to hypothesize that the projects that are carried out by civic associations (that

use the FMs for the practical realization of their ideas about sustainable production and consumption) will have the greater transformative potential.

### *Governance Model of the Initiative and Regulatory Environment*

The described initiative has been driven from its beginning by the activities of civic organizations. This holds for the markets organized in Prague in 2009 and 2010. The other FMs that were part of the boom, which began in the following season, were often organized together with municipalities. Their engagement, however, was mostly related to the selection of the site, technical aspects of the markets, hygienic conditions and financial aspects. Simply speaking, the representatives of municipalities were more concerned about the management of the public space, rather than about the food issues (interviews 8, 10).

In the second stages of development, the involvement of the public administration has increased. This holds mainly for the FMs established in towns in 2011. Many of the organizers used financial support from the revolving fund of the Ministry of Environment for their activities. According to the interviewed representative of the policymakers, the Ministry provided about CZK 10 million and, in this way, supported approximately 100 new FMs (interview 3). The number of markets in the Czech Republic has doubled. It is worth noting that the official requirements for establishing the markets were relatively loosely defined. Organizers were obliged to set up a new market without any specification about its structure, the number of farmers or products on offer. The strategic documents related to this grant scheme state that the priority of the programme is the support of a healthy lifestyle and financial assistance to the new market organizers, rather than of specific groups of farmers or specific production standards, such as organic.

Regarding the governance aspects of the initiative, it is interesting to consider the role of the farmers, who represent the third pillar next to the civic organizations and the public administration (Renting, this issue). The engagement of farmers in the initiative was conditioned by de-routinization of their practices and attitudes towards the direct marketing of food. In this way, civic organizations played a crucial role. They managed to connect 'sceptical' farmers with 'demanding' consumers and proved in practice that there is a great potential for such alternative cooperation, as was directly pointed out by a farmer, who used the opportunity to enlarge his business through product innovation and direct sales:

'They learned... I remember talking with [farmers] three years ago, who wanted to do something, or had an opportunity to start a business on farms. They kept asking what they could do... now they see that it works, they see that it is possible to produce, that it is possible to sell' (interview 14 – Farmer).

The success of the FMs has also set up important learning processes that strengthen and enlarge the niche networks. This occurs among the engaged organizers (civic organizations and municipalities) who often share their good practices and experience and learn from each other. However, an important shift in thinking has also occurred on the side of consumers after discovering that direct food marketing represents a convenient opportunity for buying food outside of the conventional regime. Consequently, farmers have started to develop new alternative marketing channels that go beyond FMs. One of the key questions about the governance of the initiative is

related to the future. The FMs established in 2009–2010 relied on the central role of civic associations. In the subsequent stages, the actorship of the initiative has become more diverse. Apart from the efforts of some municipalities to gain more control over successful FMs, one can see that the positive experience with the markets has provided a new impetus to farmers' activities and new consumer groups. These newly empowered groups contribute to the development of the new food networks, such as farmers' shops, CSA groups and new cooperatives operating box schemes.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The overview of the alternative initiatives points to an increasing role of consumers in the emerging transitions of the agri-food regime in the Czech Republic. The examples of the initiatives that have emerged in the last decade show that consumers are entering into new relationships with farmers. The FMs established in 2010 brought about a radical change in the course of alternative initiatives. The emergence of FMs has been related to internal pressure of the regime on one side, and to new opportunities on the other side. The dominating industrial regime of production was not able to respond to the new demands of Czech consumers related to the turn towards quality, which resulted in a rapid development of the initiative and successful anchorage of the FM.

Development of the initiative followed patterns that were described in Western Europe about a decade ago. Holloway et al. (2000) studied FMs in the UK, which started in Bath in 1997 as the re-establishment of an old tradition that had almost vanished in the post-war era. The first FMs were also associated with a tremendous atmosphere of enthusiasm, since the markets managed to respond to an increased awareness among certain groups of consumers of new food quality aspects. According to the authors, the FM in that time created 'an alternative space which offers a challenge to the dominance of the supermarket-productivist agriculture nexus' (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000, p. 293). In this sense, the Czech case does not produce many novel empirical findings.

What is particularly interesting in the Czech context is the role of civic organizations, which (together with other agencies such as city councils) acted as the catalyst for the development of this alternative initiative. An important role in the development of the civic food networks in the Czech Republic was played by innovators who did not come from the countryside nor were directly linked to agriculture, whereas consumer engagement produced an alternative food network that was clearly absent from the Czech Republic. The FMs draw on other initiatives that have emerged before them. A major part of the FMs' success is based on their ability to carry products that were not offered by the incumbent regime. The institutionalization of the FM was facilitated by the specific notion of food quality, which, on one hand, was sufficiently different to challenge the quality provided by conventional retailers but, on the other hand, was not too radical to fail to attract wider social groups of consumers and producers. This point is evident with regard to the ambivalent relationship of FMs with organic products.

For many actors engaged in food initiatives, organic farming provides a common framework for defining quality. This is obvious in the case of the box schemes and community-supported agriculture. In the case of the FMs the relationship is less clear. The mainstream of the FM initiative is focused on food quality, which does not necessarily correspond to certified organic production. This finding suggests that

the organic movement in the Czech Republic, due to its specific post-Socialist context, is not strong enough to exert more influence on the transition of the regime. The current FM initiative thus relies on a particular network of actors who are not necessarily proponents of the organic sector. Such an emphasis on product-based food quality, instead of the process-based qualities, however, questions the transformative potential of the initiative.

The main effect of the FM in the Czech context is the institutionalization of the practices that evidently contribute to changes in the agri-food regime, which may potentially, in the distant or near future, scale up. The FM has managed to de-routinize the practices of food producers, move the issue of food quality into public discourse and facilitate the establishment of new links between urban consumers and the countryside. Since the FM represents an emerging transition, it is not clear whether it will succeed in the long term. Increasing its role in the transition process will most likely rely on its ability to include additional definitions of food qualities and advocate them in interaction with the dominant regime.

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