

'We want medicine, not ideology'. Public engagement with controversial technology in a 'new' EU country: the case of in vitro fertilisation in Poland

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Much of the debate, research and practices of public engagement in policy-making on controversial science and technology have been focused on the so called 'old' EU countries. Hardly any attention is being paid to the question to what extent and in what form citizens of the 'new' EU countries are (becoming) engaged with this type of issues. In order to start redressing the balance I examine forms of citizens' participation in an ongoing controversy on the regulation of in vitro fertilisation in Poland, a country where public involvement in policy-making on science and technology is not perceived as a policy problem, where ethics committees at all levels are still to be instituted and where Participatory Technology Assessment arrangements remain unexplored.

IVF is practiced in Poland for more than twenty years but to date there is no specific regulation of this practice. The issue became topical at the end of 2007 when the minister of health announced her intention to reimburse the costs of the treatment by the National Health Fund. The announcement and the subsequent publication of the report by the Advisory Expert Committee proposing a highly restrictive regulation of IVF prompted an intense debate and political struggle between the Catholic Church's hierarchy and lay catholic pro-life groups on one hand and a secular coalition of sometimes ad hoc organised groups of scientist, ethicists, women's and patients' organisations on the other. This configuration of the adversaries is not specific to Poland; it had been seen before in the 'old' EU countries. Still some aspects make this case worthwhile to consider.

Any attempt to regulate IVF and related technologies and any analysis of the regulatory processes has to take account of the specific position of the Catholic Church in Poland. Since the beginning of the transition, the Church exerts a powerful influence on public and political life by virtue of its organisational infrastructure, institutionalised relations with the state, strong representation in political life and the ability to impose its values regarding human embryo, procreation and family in public discourse. In the discussed case, the extremely conservative stance of the Church regarding IVF together with direct political intervention and the use of offensive rhetoric, contributed to an effective self-organisation of secular actors. The coalition of these actors led by the women's reproductive health organization drafted a professional, liberal law regulating IVF practice. The pro-life movement responded with a law proposal banning IVF. Both citizens' initiatives, exploiting different pathways, in short time succeeded in placing their draft regulations on the parliamentary agenda.

In the paper I argue that an ideologically volatile political landscape and an idiosyncratic legislative system created room for the rise of novel, bottom-up forms of de facto public involvement. I assess to what extent the citizens' initiatives impacted the actual policy-making and I contend that for many actors this regulatory struggle serves as a proxy for the struggle about the shape of democracy in transition.