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Dual Quality Foodstuffs in Europe

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Report Highlights:

Two studies conducted by Eastern European Members States (MS) have concluded that identically-branded food products are being sold with lower quality in Eastern Europe than Western Europe. Complaints have been brought to the European Commission by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). There is continuing discussion in the Commission over how best to resolve the matter.

General Information:

Europe and U.S. news outlets have reported a difference in the quality of certain foodstuffs sold in the Eastern and Western European markets. Two studies completed in Hungary and Slovakia confirmed this finding. It is not a food safety issue and only pertains to differences in quality.

In 2016, Hungary's food safety authority, NEBI, examined 24 products sold in both Hungary and Austria. Findings include differences in the quality of Nutella and Manner wafers, with Hungary receiving the lower quality item.

On February 23, 2017, the Slovak Spectator reported that the Slovakian Agriculture Ministry and the State Veterinary and Food Administration (ŠVPS) tested a range of 22 foodstuffs sold in retail chains in Slovakia and Austria in November and December 2016. They selected a range of food, including dairy, meat and fish products, chocolates, baked goods, cheese, and drinks. The packaging was checked, and information about the composition and weight, as well as the color, flavor, and smell was included.

In their tests, the inspectors focused on quality parameters like the content of meat, fats, proteins, sweeteners, and food coloring.

Results showed that about half of the foodstuffs tested displayed significant differences in their composition.

FoodDrinkEurope representing the European food and beverage manufacturers, state that these results must be explained in order to be fully understood. For example, in Iglo fish sticks, the fish content in Slovakia is lower than its Austrian counterpart. However, the Slovakian product contains the same fish content as the product sold in the UK, Netherlands, and Portugal.

This issue has been going on for some time. According to a September 2011 report by the European Parliament's Committee on the Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety, a study conducted in April 2011 by the Slovak Association of Consumers alleged that major food and drink multinational corporations were creating products of variable quality to be distributed to different European countries under the same name.

The Association performed tests on food products purchased from stores in eight EU Member States (MS): Germany, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czech Republic. Products that were tested include Coca-Cola, Tchibo coffee, and Milka chocolate. Of all the tested products, only Milka chocolate was of identical quality across all MS.

A Nestlé representative responded to allegations by stating, "Our recipes reflect cultural differences between countries and regions, including within the European Union, developed according to local consumer preferences. There may be some minor variations in the ingredients used in some of our products sold within the EU to cater to local consumer preferences."

In June 2011, a Romanian MEP issued a formal question asking if the European Commission and the European Food Safety Authority had a position on the issue and knowledge of the sale of identically branded products of varying quality across MS.

In October 2011, the European Parliament issued a news release stating that MEPs from Romania, Czech Republic, and Hungary had received complaints about the quality discrepancies from their constituents.

Because the issue was not resolved in 2011, it has continued to gain traction in EU institutions. At the March 6, 2017 Agriculture Council of the EU, ministers were briefed on the issue by the Slovak, Czech, and Hungarian delegations. The Commission committed to follow up and asked MS to report occurrences of dual quality foodstuffs to national authorities and the Commission.

A report released on May 2, 2017 by the European Union of General Practitioners references an April 11, 2017 event co-hosted by Romanian and Czech MEPs in the European Parliament on ‘Dual Quality Foodstuffs’. At the event, feelings of inferiority by Eastern European consumers were addressed.

Current EU law requires commercial product labels to identify all ingredients and provides that labels cannot be ‘misleading’. The law does not require the same recipe for identically-branded products.

FoodDrinkEurope has responded by saying that consumer preference, local sourcing, affordability, and legislation are all legitimate reasons for different recipes of products. Legislation can mean national rules, such as mandatory fortifications, and different legal interpretations of rules, can influence recipes across the EU. They say that tests put out by Eastern European MS have not had conclusive results due to different size stock keeping units (SKU), sub-brands, shelf-life stages, and production dates. They support an EU-funded test of products across Europe, and assert that manufacturers are ready to collaborate with authorities to provide further transparency by explaining why individual product recipes are different. Within this context, manufacturers are willing to work with national Consumer Protection Authorities to address concerned citizens by opening their factories to consumers. FoodDrinkEurope also advocates for harmonized EU testing protocol. Representatives stated that the issue is very political in Eastern Europe with an anti-EU sentiment. Representatives presented on this topic at a high-level Sherpa meeting in Brussels on June 20.

The Commission wants a subtle solution, such as a transparency charter for manufacturers. Yet some Eastern European countries are proposing more extreme alternatives, including mandated identical recipes, prices, or ingredients for identically-branded products. A compulsory ‘dual quality’ label for every applicable product has been suggested as well.

After the Sherpa meeting, the Commission issued a press release stating that the evidence received by the 21 MS further to the request made at the March 6, 2017 Agriculture Council meeting, does not show any significant differentiation in product quality or nutritional content.

As was stated earlier, this is not a food safety issue. At the Sherpa meeting, the question of if the market could solve this issue on its own was discussed. When the Bulgarian PM spoke on the issue, calling it “food apartheid”, he announced that the Bulgarian government would begin to test identically-branded products sold on its market to those sold in Germany and Austria. In Bulgaria, disparities in quality of local, Bulgarian-produced goods, such as wine without grapes and cheese without milk, have not been addressed in the same fashion. The industry’s willingness to comply with quality tests and give full transparency of their manufacturers indicates that there is not an intrinsic problem with this issue. The

MS that are raising this matter in Eastern Europe are ostensibly doing so for political reasons.