

'The quality of food in the EU imposes double standards in individual countries'

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The Visegrad Group countries want the EU to take measures against the unfair division of Europeans by food quality. The meeting of the four countries - Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland last week initiated the procedure for discussing dual food standards in the Union. The issue was also raised at the March 6 meeting of the EU Council on Agriculture, where the Bulgarian Minister of Agriculture and Food Prof. Dr. Hristo Bozukov called for a solution involving changes to consumer protection and food safety laws. Consequently, in Bulgaria, a study of the experience of the Visegrad Four countries will begin, as ordered by the Executive Director of the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency (BFSA) Dr. Damyan Iliev. Following the analysis, a specific action plan will be developed, taking into account the specifics of the national market.

The consumption of certain foods in recent years has been increasing equally in both Western and Eastern Europe. More and more established brands are entering the Eastern markets and in a very short time manage

to accumulate the projected profits. In practice, there is already no visual difference whether the buyer is in a supermarket in Berlin, Madrid, Budapest or Sofia. But the global homogenization of market demand in no way can stop the flow of shopping Europeans across the old borders of Europe. Every Saturday, groups of Austrians fill their baskets with products in Bratislava, Brno or the small Hungarian towns near the former border, because it is many times cheaper. Conversely, crowds from the Visegrad Group countries flock to Vienna because goods in the West are of higher quality, have a different taste, and their ingredients differ from those listed on the labels in their grocery stores. Paradoxical or not, dual standards in the Union, with a single common market, are a well-used policy.

Last month, the Slovak Ministry of Agriculture compared 22 products of the same brand purchased in Bratislava and two Austrian cities and found that half of them differed in taste, composition, and even appearance. This is most often observed in orange juices, which in Slovakia do not contain real juice, unlike those purchased in Austria, Tatiana Jančariková informed Reuters.

The companies, for their part, explain the different ingredients in goods sold on Eastern markets with local taste and preferences. Manufacturers reduce the most expensive ingredients in goods to make prices more affordable and protect their profits in Central and Eastern European countries, where incomes remain lower compared to the old EU members. Large multinational companies also rely on the behavioral practices of the population, known for its organic choice during its political regime almost 30 years ago. According to them, preferences are oriented towards quantity at the expense of quality.

One product with two faces - the practice is completely legal in the EU

The first public claim of a discrepancy in the quality of identical products was made in 2011 by the Slovak consumer association. At their initiative, 6 products of leading brands such as "Coca-Cola", "Milka", "Kotányi", "Nescafé", etc. were examined, and for some of them, a discrepancy in ingredients was found. At the same time in Sofia, at a meeting in the Ministry of Agriculture, the then minister Miroslav Naydenov drew attention to the problem of foods intended only for Central and Eastern Europe, but no concrete measures were taken on the topic.

In 2015, Czech MEP Olga Sehnalová presented a study by the Prague University of Chemistry and Technology on the differences in foods of the same brand in the East and West. This was followed by a series of laboratory tests showing deviations in the nutritional content of products of the same brand.

Only, this practice is legal in the EU because the ingredients are declared and written on the labels. In reality, these foods and beverages are not dangerous to the consumer. The law does not require identical content, but proper listing of all (non)permitted ingredients on the product label.

The Visegrad Group and the EC

The four countries want the EC to examine the problem and bring regulations into a form that does not allow discrepancies in the content of identical products in different member states.

At the meeting of agriculture ministers, the European Commission committed to the presented situation and defined the dual standard of products in the Union as unacceptable. In order to make a real comparison with the quality of food offered in Western and Central and Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, monitoring of products of the same brand offered by the same retail chain but in different countries is needed. Therefore, the Commission will draw up a list of a group of foods that will be examined.

Bulgaria supports the protest of the four countries and declares itself against the dual standard of food and beverages in the EU

The Bulgarian Food Safety Agency has been selected as the control body that will conduct monitoring of products with dual standards on the territory of the country. For the BFSA, it is essential that foods offered on the market are safe for consumption and that discrepancies in the quality of food on the common European market are reduced. For the upcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU, one of Bulgaria's priorities will be "Food Fraud" and misleading practices, announced the BFSA press center.

At the March 6 meeting of the EU Council on Agriculture, the Minister of Agriculture and Food Prof. Dr. Hristo Bozukov emphasized, that the use of cheaper raw materials and a different proportion of the ingredients used, and at the same time offering the produced foods at prices like those of high-quality products, is a clear abuse of consumers' trust in a given brand.