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Food Quality in Romania. Compliant or Not with Food Quality in Western Europe?

Silvius STANCIU

Abstract

The quality of food sold on the Romanian market represents a topical issue, of maximum interest for the health of the population. Information regarding the existence of double production standards for food products destined to East and West European markets has become a viral issue, with a wide public debate at media level, profile faculties and research institutes, governmental and non-governmental bodies. The article proposed a comparative analysis of the media information and the CEE official's reaction, correlated with the official results of the analysis carried out by the profile governmental bodies for the assessment of the quality of food products from the Romanian market. The results of the researches carried out have highlighted the lack of technical expertise of the national authorities, a late and improper reaction to sensitive issues at European level in the field of food products quality, linked also to discrepancies existing between G15 and the rest of the European Union, the inability of certain decisions focused on the cause of the problem analysed. The measures taken by the Romanian authorities were either late and the costs incurred for carrying out certain food analysis were useless. The lack of certain specialists' decision-makers in the food sector, the prevalence of political decisions, based on obscure interests will still lead to discrepancies in the sector of food products marketed in Romanian stores, will increase the dependence of the domestic import market and will destroy the few companies with Romanian capital which are still active in the food sector.

Keywords: *food, quality, double standards, Europe, Romania.*

1. Introduction

The quality of food products marketed in Romania is a topical issue for the population, officials, media, non-governmental bodies with powers in

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the field of consumer protection and media. During the recent years, rumors that there are double quality standards for food production, different for Western European countries and for the Central and Eastern European countries (CEE), have been confirmed in case of countries included in the Visegrad countries and have led to significant public debates, with articles in written and audio-visual media, with views from national officials and academic environment, with various reactions from consumers, manufacturers and traders or non-governmental organizations. The quality issue of food products marketed on CEE markets is primarily linked to national interests, consumer protection, and to unfair competition exercised by large food retail networks that have reduced to minimum the share of the national sector in food production and marketing.

2. Media information

Over the past 10 years, media information has been published, which was subsequently confirmed by official releases regarding the different quality of food marketed on European markets. Thus, a number of countries from the CEE have reported that multinational manufacturers of food, cosmetics and clothing products are in breach of European Commission (EC) Directive 2005/29/EC on unfair commercial practices of companies from the Community market by selling on the CEE market products with different quality levels.

As response to these notifications, the European Union (EU), through the Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Vytenis Andriukaitis, noted that the EU does not have legal means to sanction producers distributing, under the same brands, different quality foods within the Member States. According to the interview, published in the Hungarian newspaper HVG, quoted by News.ro⁸, the European Commissioner has specified that food business operators cannot be forced to adjust their products to the purchasing power or national tastes, and Community regulations do not include provisions based on which the EU could prosecute the incriminated food producers. European legislation in the field of food trade is quite permissive, the manufacturers having the obligation to state on the label only the list of ingredients, which must be in line with the composition of the product.

By speculating the ambiguity of European rules, multinational food companies, mainly located in E15, have the right to choose the use of different ingredients within the Member States. The only clear regulation is that consumers must be accurately informed, and the composition of each product must be properly indicated and made available to buyers.

3. Is the same quality of the food sold in Romania and in Western Europe?

The article proposed a comparative analysis of the media information and the CEE official's reaction, correlated with the official results of the analysis carried out by the profile governmental bodies for the assessment of the quality of food products from the Romanian market.

4. Research Methods

Data on complaints from Eastern countries regarding the quality of food sold by retailers in the international food market were collected from credible media and official communiqués from national bodies. For Romania, the data were collected from officials (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority, and the National Consumer Protection Agency). For food non-conformities at European level, the portal of the European Commission Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) was used.

The information selected was statistically processed and graphically represented. The results obtained were compared with other scientific information from the related literature, for a better interpretation and for obtaining justified conclusions.

5. Results

Hungary

Official alarm signals about the low quality of food from international retailers and marketed on the CEE market, compared to those from the Western area, were recently drawn by Hungarian officials who stated in February 2017 that the large international companies are accustomed to marketing products of lower quality on the CEE market, even if there is used the same brand and a price level similar or higher compared to the Western European countries [21]. As arguments there have been submitted the information provided by the Hungarian Veterinary Sanitary Authority (NEBIH), which, upon the consumers' notifications, has analysed during February 2017 a sample of 24 food products sold through Lidl and Aldi supermarkets. Following the inquiry, various quality levels were ascertained, mainly organoleptic, between similar foods marketed in Hungary and Austria (e.g. Manerr wafers less crunchy or Nutella spreadable

cream less sweet). The Hungarian authorities have ordered the extension of researches and further analysis on the imported foods.

In March 2017, NEBIH has completed the analysis of 96 products purchased from Hungary, Austria and Italy. Of the total of 84 food products, seven beer assortments and five types of animal food were compared. Differences were found in 71 cases, respectively 30 cases where taste differences were found, eight cases where different ingredients were used by manufacturers for food production and 33 cases where both the taste and the ingredients were different. The analysis has confirmed that in some cases, lower quality products are sold in Hungary than in Western Europe, although the same brand or a comparable brand is used [1].

Slovakia

According to Brândușa¹, Slovak authorities have also discovered differences in taste, composition and appearance in nearly ten food products sold locally, compared to the same products from Germany and Austria. Thus, as a result of analysis conducted by The Veterinary and Food Administration (SVPS) the profile Slovak National Authority, from the analysis of 22 food products marketed under the same brand, in Slovakia (especially in Bratislava) and Austria (in the bordering localities Kittsee and Hainburh), significant differences in composition were detected. The food products tested included dairies, meat or fish products, chocolate, cheese, beverages and pastries. SVPS has focused itself on verifying some quality parameters (meat, fat and protein content), the analysis of the package and information about the composition, stated on the label and the quantity from the product label, or over sensory characteristics (colour, taste or smell). Following the inspections, were found lower quantities of food products marketed on the Slovak market under some prices identical to those practiced on the Austrian market, a lower meat content and a higher fat content, or the presence of some sweeteners and preservatives absent in similar products from Austria [21].

Consumers 'Association from Slovakia has undertaken similar tests also in 2011, when packaged food products have been comparatively analysed, purchased from shops from Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Tests conducted in 2011 have shown that some multinational companies are selling different quality products but under the same brand in different European countries.

The notice sent to Brussels had no effect, the European Commission arguing that the accusations were groundless and that multinationals are free to adjust the quality of products depending on the trading market.

Poland

Poland reported quality differences between food products sold by transnational companies on the domestic and western European markets under the same brand even since 2011, when compositional differences were identified for assortments of products that included Coca-Cola drinks, Kotanyi black and red Pepper, Nescafe Gold instant coffee, Jacobs Kronung coffee beans and Tchibo Espresso coffee (e.g. the use of corn syrup as sweetener in Coca Cola, as well as artificial sweeteners of aspartame and acesulfame, compared to the use of sugar in products destined for the Western market) [7].

Within the notice sent to the European Commission following the extraordinary meeting of Visegrad Group (2017 March 2), there was stated the existence of some quality differences on a range of products marketed on the Polish and German markets (e.g. Leibniz biscuits marketed in Poland contain five percent of butter and some palm oil, while the same sold on their German home market contains 12 percent of butter and no palm oil, and a cheaper alternative to butter) [14]. During the Warsaw meeting (2017 March 2), the Polish Minister of Agriculture, together with the representative ministers from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, took a firm position against the double standards of food quality, stating that some Western companies had used cheaper ingredients in food products sold in CEE compared to products destined to the western market, and product prices are comparable or net superior [22].

Czech Republic

Information regarding the different level of food quality on the Central and Eastern European market was also sent by the Czech Republic, which joined Slovakia and Hungary, showing that multinationals sell low-quality food products on the eastern market, which is perceived as poorer and less competitive. Following an interview published by HotNews.ro in February 2017, the Deputy Minister of Agriculture from the Czech Republic required Romania to join the Visegrad Group and take position against lower quality food products marketed on the CEE market [23]. According to the interview, the Czech authorities invoked in support of their statements the study carried out by the Czech Chemistry University, which showed that the same products as brand, traded by international networks, have different compositions in the Czech Republic compared to Germany. Thus, about one third of the products produced under the same brand have an inferior quality in the Czech Republic. As examples of products with different compositions, have been mentioned in the interview a range of margarine

with a fat content of 60% in the Czech Republic and 70% in Germany, a series of soft drinks that in the Czech Republic contain sugar, fructose and steviol glycosides, while in Germany they have only sugar, canned fish of a low quality and other products. Food products have an inferior quality in Central and Eastern Europe (in fact in the new EU member states, generally), because some companies want to make savings on the expense of consumers.

The steps taken by the Czech officials to the European Commission did not lead to a satisfactory result, the Ministry of Agriculture from Prague initiating a new investigation, which supported the different quality theory for the same brands of food products marketed on the European markets.

Croatia

Following the scandal from the Central and Eastern Europe on the differentiated food quality, Croatian officials have announced that in Croatia has been started a study in April, which results will be presented in June. For the first time in the EU, the Croatian study on the double standards does not only analyse food products, but also detergents and cosmetics [11].

Bulgaria

Bulgaria's response on the food quality emerged in March 2017. Romania's neighbours from southern Danube forming a common front with the Visegrad Group countries in the scandal of double standards applied by multinational companies producing food and beverages and by sending an official notification to the European Commission related to this aspect [2].

Bulgaria joined a similar action of Slovakia also in 2011, after it has been discovered that Coca-Cola products sold in the two countries contained artificial and synthetic sweeteners, while in Germany and Greece they contained only sugar [5].

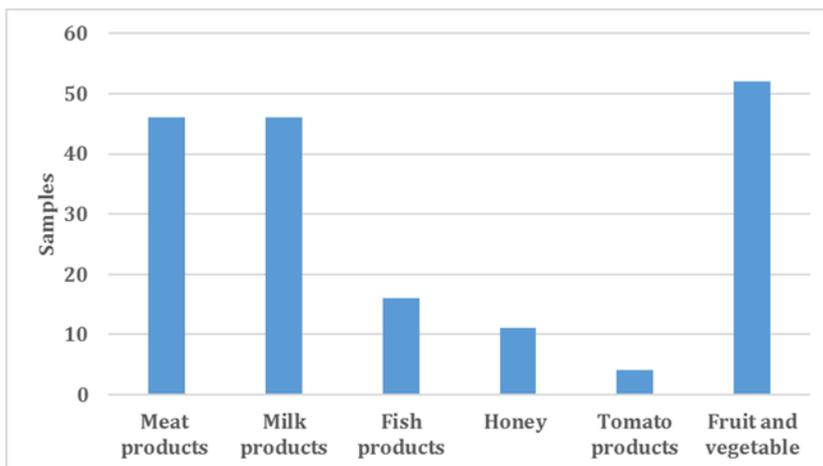
The poor quality of food products, the presence of products with a lot of salt, fats or sweeteners on the Bulgarian market is associated by officials with the population's poor health or with the obesity phenomena on children, 26.5% of pupils aged between 5 and 18 years being overweight. In May 2017, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov described alleged differences in food quality as 'unacceptable and insulting' [19]. The Minister of Agriculture and Food from Bulgaria has established a commission of inquiry within the Food Safety Agency from the neighboring country, inspections being aimed to chocolate products, dairies and meat products, soft drinks, juices and baby food [9].

The results of the laboratory analysis published in June 2017 showed that double standards are a fact and that 31 different ingredients have been identified in seven of the 31 analysed foods sold by multinational companies in Bulgaria. At the same time, 16 products are sold at higher prices in Bulgaria compared to Western European countries [4].

In July 2017, the Bulgarian Government specified that it would insist that the European Union should solve the issue of "double standards", in view of identifying some qualitative differences between the products analysed [3].

Romania

In response to the scandal of foods with double quality standards notified by Visegrad Group on February 24, 2017, the Romanian authorities made statements and specified that a joint commission will be established, consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, the National Veterinary and Food Safety Authority and those from National Consumers Protection Agency, which will analyse the situation reported by the neighboring countries [10]. While authorities from Slovakia and also from other East European countries have conducted comparative analysis regarding the quality of products sold in supermarkets from their countries, Romania's officials have not rushed to launch an investigation. Thus, the Ministry of Agriculture started only in March 2017 an inquiry regarding the assessment of the quality of imported food products marketed on the domestic market [15]. 175 samples were collected (although initially the information released in the press talked about 200 samples), which were collected for carrying out the following estimations: determination of the level of pesticide residues for vegetables; physico-chemical determinations for meat, milk, fish, honey; determination of the percentage of dry matter and dyes from the tomato paste; determination of the presence of fats of vegetable origin in milk and milk products. ANSVSA through the Laboratory within DSVSA Bucharest has analysed 123 samples and the National Phytosanitary Authority (ANF), through the Laboratory for Control of Plants Pesticide Residues and Plants Products, 52 samples for pesticides detection. Distribution of samples collected for analysis by categories is presented in figure 1.



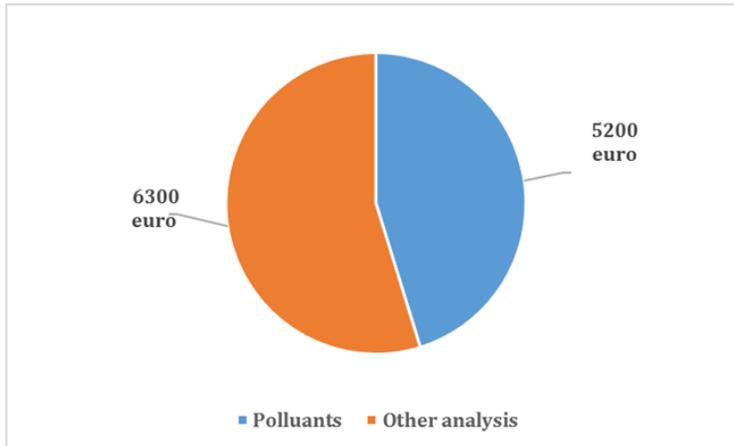
Source Author, by using Stanciu 16.

Figure 1. Samples of analysed products, by groups of food

The analysis concerned only the compliance of label specifications with the characteristics of the products analysed, but without a comparative assessment with similar products from the Western markets.

On April 10, 2017 ANSVSA made public the results of the analysis carried out over the 175 imported food products collected from the Romanian market (Carrefour, Metro, Billa, Cora, Mega Image, Penny and Profi) [24]. A single product, namely a polyphlorous honey product from France did not meet the specifications stated by the manufacturer, having 50% more hydroxyl-methyl-furfural than the limit allowed. The other 174 products from the 11 hypermarkets (meat and meat products, dairy products, vegetables, fruits, tomato pastes) imported by Romania from the European Union did not exceed the legal norms and would comply with the specifications of the labels [21].

The analysis carried out, although inappropriate for the purpose of finding out the qualitative differences with the western products, amounted 11,300 EURO in order to prove that European products are safe and compliant with the label (figure 2).



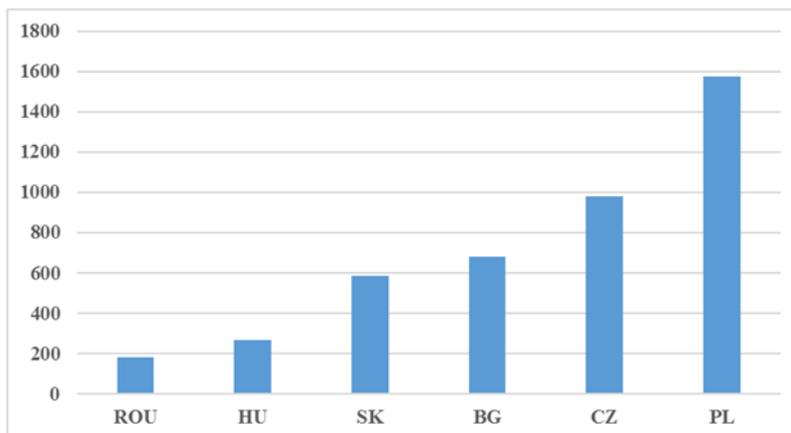
Source Author, using data from Stanciu16.

Figure 2. Cost of analysis of samples

Although this aspect has quieted the officials, not existing any suspicions about the consumer's illness, the food quality scandal has completely addressed another issue. The safety of food marketed on the Romanian market is a priority, but it is assessed by authorities periodically and is guaranteed by the producers, which, in this case, representing large food retail companies, have implemented their own IFS 22000 quality standards, more restrictive than national standards. On the level of profits recorded by the large network of stores and the prestige they enjoy from the perspective of consumer's safety, it is unlikely that major quality deficiencies could have been identified that would affect the consumer's health.

At the same time, the Minister of Agriculture from Romania has publicly stated that will send requests to the counterparts from five European countries regarding the collection of samples of certain similar foods for comparison. Four months after the outbreak of the scandal in June 2017, the Minister of Agriculture announced that a team of inspectors within the Ministry of Agriculture will go to Belgium to buy products that will be compared with those sold in Romania, but the list of products that will be subjected to comparative assessment has not been completed [20]. Until the moment of completing this article (2017 July 01), the results of comparative assessment were not made public.

As it can see in figure 3, in the period 2010-2017 Romania has the lowest level of notifications on the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) of the analysed countries [6].



Source Author, using EC data⁶

Figure 3. RASFF Notifications by countries (2010-2017)

The data presented in figure 3 could be interpreted as a high level of food on the Romanian market, unlike aspect or by the inability of authorities to identify nonconformities.

NGO's Consumer Response in Romania

The Romanian Association for Consumers' Protection (APC) has limited only to public statements about the double standard scandal regarding food production, admitting that there are qualitative differences between products destined for the domestic and western markets [12]. There is no other available analytical information on APC's website regarding the analysis for the comparative checking of the quality of food products marketed on European markets under the same brand or other official releases on the food quality scandal.

Independent analysis carried out by the Faculty of Food Science and Engineering, the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Bucharest, and by the Institute for Food Bio resources upon the initiative of Pro TV Romania have led to the identification of certain quality differences, expressed by low sensory characteristics for products destined to the domestic market, nutritional differences (different chemical composition in weight of proteins or fat) or different physical characteristics [13]. The comparative price analysis carried out by Pro TV reporters on dairy products from cheese category has revealed a higher price level with at least 1 euro/kilo on domestic products compared to the one practiced on the same products from the western markets. Manufacturing companies interviewed by reporters have specified that the quality differences found

may be due to technology, raw materials used or consumer's preferences, and price differences are driven by supply and demand.

Although the source of information is a television station with news for the general public, the scientific competence of the food industry specialists examined makes the information credible, thus it is very likely to exist sensory and compositional differences between food products for the domestic and western markets. Unfortunately, the Romanian authorities did not carry out a comparative study, did not make public the methods of analysis used and did not appeal to academic's/research institutes as in the neighbouring countries.

This chapter presents the results, in a structured manner.

6. Conclusions

The Romanian authorities have not taken a firm and precise position in the controversy regarding double standards in food production at European level.

As in other cases related to food safety incidents signalled by the author based on Rapid Alert System for Food and Feeds notifications [17]. or online surveys [18], the conclusions drawn may be the following:

- on the domestic market are traded the best food products at European level, unlikely aspect, due to the common characteristics of the CEE market and the low incomes of the Romanian consumer, the possibility of selling food products identical to the Western ones was denied by the analysis derived from the academic and research environment,

- national bodies certified in the field of food safety and security are not able to identify the non-compliances present on imported food products signalled on the EEC market and are limited only to conformity assessments, without making a comparative assessment with similar products marketed in other European countries.

The document highlighted the lack of a proper response and a low concern of national officials on the health of the Romanian food consumer compared to the reaction of neighboring countries. While the Government of Budapest is preparing a draft law requiring the multinational companies to specify on the labels of products sold in Hungary if there are quality differences or regarding the ingredients, the Romanian state has not taken any effective action in this regard, limiting itself to the appointment of committees and to press statements. Analysis conducted by officials have proved the safety of food products marketed by prestigious food retail chains, which are very attentive to the food consumer's safety, thus it was very unlikely to be detected major inconsistencies and lack of correlations

with the label specifications. From the point of view of the debated issue, the analysis carried out were unnecessary and the costs unjustified, as they did not carry out a comparative assessment of the quality of imported products traded on the domestic market with those marketed under the same brand on the western markets.

Romanian officials have demonstrated once again the lack of technical and economic knowledge, the impossibility of some clear decisions in the food sector focused on the issue debated at CEE level and incapacity to support the interests of the national economy and of the Romanian consumer.

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