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Foodstuffs Double Standard

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Abstract: This paper aims at emphasizing a recent phenomenon which is the double standard applied to foodstuffs on the market in Eastern Europe. The same producer produces and sells a trade mark to consumers from both Western and Eastern Europe. The only problem is that the quality standard of one product, is not the same, for the eastern and western consumers. This study rhetorically asks the question: are consumers in Western Europe better than the ones in Eastern Europe? *Scope and approach:* The study is based on information and some commentaries from a series of publications which pointed out the double standard applied to foodstuffs in the countries in Eastern Europe. If for Romania there is some data related to labeling and declared energetic value, in the case of Hungary and Slovakia we find out the products, the producers, the trading companies as well as the differences in organoleptic attributes (taste, smell, colour, packaging or structure). *Key findings and conclusions:* We highlight the products which present double standards by means of energetic value, quantity, structure or main organoleptic attributes. It is essential to understand whether “the double standard applied to foodstuffs traded in Eastern Europe is useful. Does it help in any way the 100 million inhabitants?”

Keywords: “food apartheid”; foodstuffs “higher-quality”; communist food nostalgias

JEL Classification: D18; I12; L66; P46

1. Introduction

There is a firm that processes and sells coffee under the same trademark, in two different countries. The packaging is identical but the coffee sold in country 2 has less caffeine than the one sold in country 1. (Today are known the following most common methods of falsification of natural ground coffee: assortment falsification that is coffee substitution by various coffee substitutes, qualitative falsification, quantitative falsification, informational falsification (Chorna, et al., 2018). The same applies to fish fingers, which have the same packaging but there is less fish in the product sold in country 2. The most outrageous of all examples is baby food which not only does it have different contents, but it can also be 35% more expensive in country 2. Peanut chocolate is no exception since certain firms produce and sell chocolate which contains a lot less peanuts in country 2. Is it a coincidence that country 2 in the EU was behind the “Iron Curtain” before 1989?

If initially it seemed to be a major piece of news on the consumption of food produced in Western Europe and sold in the eastern part at a lower quality, two years later there is no comment on this phenomenon. Even the reports informing consumers on the studies carried out by the responsible authorities in different countries including Romania have been short and inconclusive. Can we be the witnesses of a differentiation such as “food apartheid”? (2 Euroactiv 2017).

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2. Double Standard in European Countries

2.1. The case of Slovakia

It all started when the Slovaks crossed the border to Austria in order to buy “salami, yoghurt, butter or detergent...all of high quality. “Here they are better than in Slovakia. One would expect them to be the same since both countries are members of the EU, but it is not the case”, says one woman from Slovakia (Miron, 2019).

We should consider the main reasons why a part of the Slovaks crosses the border to Austria and other countries in order to purchase “high quality” food.

One notorious example for this food trade exodus is Coca-Cola, the soda which tastes differently in the two countries. In Slovakia it tastes slightly sweet, while in Austria it is sweet. More than this, there are different specifications on the label – sweeteners contain fructose/glucose in Slovakia and sugar in Austria.

Is it good for consumption to use fructose/glucose as sweetener, when we consider the quality of the food? Is it a consumption necessity regarded as a degree of satisfaction of a consumption need? Or could it be seen as a product made for this purpose and exposed to the high demands of metabolization without the sensory or technical risk. In this respect, the usefulness of a foodstuff, or its use value, has triggered a peculiarity which considers its double and its simultaneous degree of consumption on the “metabolical” and economic market.

Another case of the commercial food exodus is the “fish fingers Iglo”, which had 8,8% more fish in the Austrian product than in the one sold in Slovakia.

Also, there are differences regarding product packaging such as in the case of Earl Gray black tea. If in Austria it is packed in aluminum bags, in Slovakia the same product is packed in paper bags. “Aluminum tea bags maintain the flavor and the taste, while big pieces of tea leaves bring more quality”, a study shows. (Sarantis, 2017).

Emmental cheese sold in Slovakia does not have the characteristic structure and the look, that is light yellow colour and smaller or bigger holes in it. The product sold in Austria has the characteristic look “the normal colour and texture, the big holes with a diameter between 12 and 22 mm, (due to the propionic bacteria), light yellow to yellow colour which is consistent on all the surface, a little flexible and fine consistency, pleasant taste and sweet smell characteristic of fermented cheese, with a slight taste and smell of nuts,” (Birca, 2002; Fratila, 1997).

In the case of mozzarella cheese, the weight on the pack is 125g. In Slovakia, the real weight is 119,4g, while in Austria it is 124g”. (Sarantis, 2017). For instance, an orange drink sold by German Rewe Group in Slovakia did not really contain orange juice (it contained more additives and stabilizers - Es than the one sold in Austria).

In Slovakia there has been a test on 22 foodstuffs produced under the same trademark and identical packaging sold in Slovakia and Austria. (Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service, 2017).

According to results, there has been no significant difference in nine products, the small differences slightly affecting the quality in three products and visible differences which considerably affected quality in ten products. Half of the 22 products bought in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia and in two Austrian cities (less than 20 km – 13 miles away) have different taste, aspect and composition according to lab tests carried out by Slovak authorities. (Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service, 2017).

The study indicated that the main differences were connected to composition (for instance, there were ingredients with a lower ratio of fat, or animal fats were replaced by vegetal fats, also, there was a difference in the quantity of meat). There were artificial sweeteners (in Slovakia) instead of natural ones (in Austria), and fruits (colour and flavor) were replaced by artificial pigments and flavors, hence the different taste and colour. The most relevant, though, was the quality of the packaging, which was not similar with the one in Austria.

2.2. The case of Romania

Romanian authorities have analysed foodstuffs traded in local retailing chains compared to the ones in Western Europe, looking for a possible double standard. They have analysed samples from supermarkets and hypermarkets in three Western states – Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium, but also in Romania (the stores were Lidl, Kaufland and Delhaize - Mega Image in România), Maastricht (the Netherlands), Aachen (Germany) and Bruxelles (Belgium) (economica.net 2017). Twenty-nine samples have been identified and taken from the three Western states as well as Romania (meat products, dairy based products, fish cans, chocolate).

Testing has revealed there are differences between the products traded in Romania and the ones sold in Western Europe concerning the energetic value written on the label, as follows: (see table 1):

Table 1. Differences between the products traded in Romania and the ones sold in Western Europe

| Product RO name | Product EU name | Declared value on the label | Obtained RO value | Obtained EU value |
|-------------------|---------------------------|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Pork parizer | Pork parizer Germany | 279 kcal/100 g | 259,09 kcal/100 g | 274,32 kcal/100 g |
| Barbecue sausages | Barbecue sausages Germany | 280 kcal/100 g | 254,61 kcal/100 g | 282,46 kcal/100 g |
| Fish can | Fish can Germany | 377 kcal/100 g RO/181 kcal/100 g UE | 307,84 kcal/100 g | 210,34 kcal/100 g |
| Pate | Pate Czech Republic | 238 kcal/100 g | 259,98 kcal/100 g | 273,54 kcal/100 g |
| Bacon cubes | Bacon cubes Belgium | 233 kcal/100 g | 278,55 kcal/100 g | 192,14 kcal/100 g |
| Pork ham | Pork ham Germany | 222 kcal/100 g | 306,38 kcal/100 g | 230,36 kcal/100 g |
| Mackerel can | Mackerel can France | 13,6 g/100 g protein | 20,7 g/100 g protein | 22,05 g/100 g protein |
| Herring can | Herring can Germany | 13 g/100 g RO/ 15 g/100 g UE | 21,96 g/100 g protein | 20,36 g/100 g protein |
| Mackerel can | Mackerel can France | 55,11 g/100 g fish | 42,87 g/100 g fish | 47,8 g/100 g fish |

Source: (Gazeta de Agricultura/Agriculture Gazette, 2017)

Here are the analytical results of the comparative study regarding the products which were tested and which turned out to be different.

1. Pork pate, Fish can, Barbecue sausages, Ham/pork parizer, Herring can (fish): difference between the Romanian and German product concerning energetic value on the label.
2. Liver pate: difference between the Romanian and Czech product concerning energetic value on the label.
3. Bacon cubes: difference between the Romanian and Belgian product concerning energetic value on the label.
4. Mackerel can (fish): difference between the Romanian and French product concerning the energetic value and the quantity of fish in the can on the label.

The comparative study carried out on the foodstuffs in the case of double standard has revealed differences in 9 of the 29 analysed samples. Unlike the case of Hungary, the producers and sellers are not mentioned, as if this information (short and insignificant) might “upset somebody”.

The food products that arrive on the shelves of shops in Romania, respectively of neighboring states, are of a lower quality, compared to those of the rest of Europe. Laboratory tests performed by ANPC (The National Consumer Protection Authority) confirm that one fifth of the foods marketed in Romania have a lower quality than those on the external market.

Of the total of the products checked, in August 2019, 22.78% show differences in Romania, compared to those marketed in Western Europe. The results showed a huge difference, for example, the soft drink (Freeway) it contains 3% orange juice in Romania, in Spain it reaches 8%, in France it reaches 10%, and in Italy it reaches 20%.), and the case of a well-known chocolate brand, (Milka), 17% is the quantity of peanuts found in Romania, unlike France, where the quantity of peanuts is of 22%. (Alecsandru Ion, 2019).

2.3. The case of Hungary

In the case of Hungary, there is a better transparency concerning this topic, since both products and final distributors are named. The results of the analysis carried out by the Hungary’s food safety authority, (NEBIH) on the tested products reveals they have been purchased from shops like Spar, Metro, Lidl, Hofer/Aldi, from Hungary and Austria. An initial study was initiated in 2014 and another was repeated in 2017. In 2014 the study compared the sensory properties of the products, as well as the composition and truthfulness of the information listed on packages. (Half of the products were different in the two countries – in Austria, the wafers were crunchier, a spread was more easily spreadable, and one instant soup had almost twice as many meatballs as in Hungary). (Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service, 2017).

The study repeated in 2017, has revealed testing of 96 products (including beverages and pet food) within 2 months (February and March 2017), in Hungary, Austria and Italy. A difference in quality was established in 71 cases – in 30 instances the difference was based on sensory data, in eight cases there was a difference in composition, in 33 cases there were differences in both, whereas 25 products were the same. Products sold in Hungary were more likely to include fewer natural ingredients and more flavour enhancers. Many of the products bought in Hungary were more expensive, although they were deemed to be of a lesser quality than the products available in Austria and Italy (Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service, 2017). And as an example, Nutella, the famous Italian chocolate also sold in Hungary smells like Nutella and still, it does not have the same taste. It is harder and not as fine as the one in Austria. Significant differences have been found in Ritter Sport chocolate, which is black chocolate with marzipan. The one in Hungary does not melt as fast as the one in Austria. Rio Mare cans have the same net quantity, but in Hungary they have 2% less fish. Coca Cola in Hungary is less flavored and it is sweetened with a cheap syrup obtained from cornstarch (jurnalul.ro 2017) (“through the saccharification of the pre hydrolyzed in the starch we can get a large range of starch sweeteners, differentiated by composition and functional properties” (Birca A., 2002, Fratila R. 1997). In Monster Energy Drink (Green), the one made for Hungary, there was a large quantity of sucrose (jurnalul.ro 2017) (“synonym of saccharose which is a solid, clear, white substance, soluble in water and indissoluble in most organic solvents. It is the widest-spread diaglucide in nature which is found in small quantities in almost all vegetal organs (Madalina Iiis, 2016).

Nesquick in Hungary is less flavoured, the cocoa taste is weaker and it dominates the sweet taste compared to the one in Austria whose taste is more balanced and its cocoa flavor is stronger, Knorr, the beef soup with meat dumplings in Hungary weighs 48 g, while the same pack in Austria weighs 60 g, Knorr Fix Carbonara has significant differences in the two countries, the Hungarian variety there is no cheese, whereas in the Austrian one there are 3 types of cheese. And the examples can continue with Paula Puddig Landliebe and Actimel yoghurt are made of superior dairy products in Austria as compared to the ones in Hungary. Paula Pudding in Hungary has a dominant sweet taste, the same being true for the yoghurt, and the amount of calcium written on the packaging can not be found in the composition. (jurnalul.ro 2017).

“What is in the food that we buy? It’s a question whose answer is less certain than it should be. Shockingly, many food manufacturers find it acceptable to sell their food with standard packaging throughout the EU, but with very different content, and often lower quality, in different countries” (Lilyana Pavlova, 2018).

3. European Studies in the Field

A study carried out by experts from Faculty of Law of Palacký University, Olomouc, in 2017 shows that the issue of double standard is present in producers’ following activities: (European Parliament, Draft Report, 2018):

- the producers distribute (sometimes through their own distribution system) on the Eastern markets products with different flavours, contents or main ingredients from the ones sold on the Western markets. The aspect and packaging remain the same;

or

- the producer places products of different quality on different markets (that is for Eastern and Western Europe), yet keeping the same packaging or a very similar one (indistinguishable for the consumer);

or

- the producer places products having different weights on the European markets, but with the same or very similar packaging, (indistinguishable for the consumer) which misleads the buyer into believing the quantity is the same, irrespective of the outlet;

or

- when a new product is rolled out on a certain market, the producer uses a composition which claims to be superior in quality in order to gain a place on the market and attract buyers. Since consumers’ behaviour for good products is reluctant to change, after a certain period of time, there is an “alteration of the products in the network”, but there is no change in the packaging, its appearance, not even a notification regarding the new ingredients.

In regard to the aspects shown above, there has been an analysis of the results of a Pan-European campaign of testing foodstuffs, which show that some products are traded under identical or similar brandnames, but having different contents. The study assessed 1380 samples of 128 different foodstuffs from 19-member states. Yet, this test sample is not typical of the great range of foodstuffs on the EU market.(Comisia Europeana 2019).

The study showed that in most cases the contents complied with the way products were presented, however: (digi24.HD 2019).

- “23 % of the products had identical front packaging and contents, but 27 % of them indicated through the front-of-package label that their contents were different in different EU countries”
- 9 % of the products showcased as being the same in the entire EU were in reality different from the point of view of their contents: the front-of-package label was identical, but the contents were different.
- 22 % of the products were presented in a similar way, but they had different contents: the front-of-package label was similar, yet the composition of the products was different.
- Using the same packaging or a similar one for products with different contents does not follow a consistent geographical model. As well, the difference in contents of the tested products does not necessarily constitute a difference concerning the quality of the product.

“The study carried out by the European Union Common Research Center describes the situation observed on the markets of the nineteen participant member states during the time the testing took place” (Mihaela Popescu 2019) (the study took place in November-December 2018 but Romania did not participate in it. According to the latest news, those who were supposed to take care of this process, that is the National Consumers Protection Authority (ANPC), have sent a message through the former President that Romania was holding the Council Presidency of the European Union and needed to be neutral, which is why there wasn’t any data sent about the possible double standard in imported products (a statement that leaves many questions unanswered.) (cotidianul.ro 2019).

This testing campaign was part of the European Commission’s answer to the concerns about the double standard foodstuffs. The products were selected according to member states’ suggestions as a result of the complaints received by the authorities or consumers’ protection associations.

The sample test was based on a harmonized methodology developed by the Common Research Center in cooperation with other member states. This methodology allows the sampling, testing and interpreting of the data in comparable terms, in the entire EU. All EU member states have been invited to collect information regarding the contents of the selected foodstuffs sold on their markets.

19 EU member states have transmitted information regarding 113 brand name products and 15 of the distributors’ own brand products. At first, this analysis is based on the information supplied by the products’ labels and the appearance of the front part of the packaging. The following member states have taken part in the sample testing: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and the Netherlands

The published report offers a better basis for discussing double quality standards in EU. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have further measures and research in order for the evaluation to be more illustrative, and the connection between contents and quality to be better understood. (Mihaela Popescu 2019).

4. Results

All these aspects lead to the situation in which the consumer from one country who travels to another country can not be sure that the same product bought in that country is the same quality as the one they consume in the country of origin.

Eastern European leaders have concluded, after the tests showed that important western brands use cheaper ingredients in the foodstuffs sold in the ex-communist countries: “the east got tired of being Europe’s garbage can” (Muller, 2017).

Accordingly, companies that practice “double standard” should consider that major risks may occur when practicing it. For example, customers who had access to both standards may renounce buying the lower quality product therefore companies should compare the costs of not managing associated risk with those implied by risk management approach. In fact, it is a matter of ethics and business success may be affected (Mandru, 2016; Albu et al, 2017).

Considering the European regulations in the field, the European Parliament’s report shows that, when it comes to the advertising, selling or supplying products, the companies must offer consumers the correct information which could allow them to choose learnedly when they want to purchase a product.

The European Commission adopted different initiatives which regard:

- Legislative clarification of the situations in which products’ double standard quality is a deceptive practice as the recent agreed package “New advantages for consumers”;
- The setting up of a common methodology for testing foodstuffs;
- The publishing of a set of guidance meant to support national authorities in applying EU laws regarding consumers protection and foodstuffs;
- Allotting an amount of over 4,5 million euro to solve this problem;
- Testing products all over the EU by applying the same methodology to better understand the phenomenon of products’ double standards in quality.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

After having to reach an agreement, the European Commission adopted (in April 2019) a set of rules which forbid selling products with the same brand but with different ingredients on different markets. This is mostly seen as a gain for the countries in Eastern and Central Europe where same brand products had different quality.

The European Parliament and Council have reached a temporary agreement which aims to set stronger and better applied consumer protection rules. According to official documents, the agreement was supported by the Committee for Internal Market and Consumer Protection in the European Parliament. The rules submitted by the European Commission were conceived in order to limit the double standards concerning foodstuffs that countries in Central and Eastern Europe have complained about. However, the agreement is not unyielding and leaves a lot of unanswered questions. Instead of all these two European Commission officials who worked on the deal said that the intent wasn’t so much to cover every single point but to scare companies into dropping the most flagrant abuses. This allows

for clear pressure, (Jovetic, 2019), or in other words “Due to the E-s in the food, you are asked to eat only when you are hungry...”

It is believed that the unethical practice of selling low quality foodstuffs under the same brand name in the “new” member states of the east compared to the western member states is a thing of the past. Double standards in food products in the European Union have left 100 million people “feeling like Aborigines,” (Sofia Globe staff, 2018).

It has been emphasized that some multinational brands use different ingredients, mostly cheaper, in the foodstuffs sold in the eastern side of the former division of the Iron Curtain than in the products sold in countries like Austria and Germany.

The answer often heard from the producers accused of such practices was that they firstly consider local tastes and preferences, which is not true “Who is that smart person in Europe who decided Bulgarian babies prefer palm oil instead of milk?” (Agerpres, 2018). The argument that consumers in different regions prefer different tastes is not valid, but why do only products sold in the eastern countries contain pigments, flavours, additives (E-s) or the percent of the main ingredient is reduced? Probably these people in the eastern countries are used to fakes (during the Ceausescu regime the salami and parizer contained soy and herbs and are part of the culinary nostalgias of the communist era next to marmelade, rolls, yoghurt, rye bread, Graham bread, candid sugar, chocolate fudge or Eugenia biscuits), so why shouldn't they sell a similar product, of lower quality, with a lower production cost but the same profit?

Others have stated that the manufacturing circumstances and regulations which are different according to each country are responsible for these practices.

The decision whether to take or not legal actions against the companies engaged in double standard practices is left to the national authorities. The companies thought to break the rules might have to deal with fines of up to 4 % of their annual turnover. According to the bill, Brussels is going to monitor the effect of the rules for two years before presenting an analysis to the European Parliament.

It is not about the ingredients – it is also about the quality. Consumers deserve the same quality level, irrespective of the place where they are in the EU. First of all, they need to make sure the food for children is good.

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