

Dear ladies and gentlemen,
Members of the Committee on Petitions,

Thank you for having the opportunity to this hearing. Let me briefly present the petition referred to you in October 2017.

Along with a group of eminent Bulgarian public figures I addressed you and brought to your attention a problem existing within the EU. The case concerns the manufacturing and providing foods under the same brand with different composition and quality in the EU member-states. This issue has been existing for a long time and has been confirmed by a number of surveys conducted in separate countries. This issue infringes on the rights of a great number of EU citizens.

In our view this practice is a great offence and discrimination. It undermines the citizens' trust in the EU. This practice where foodstuffs under identical brand (and of identical label) have different ingredients violates not only the Bulgarian citizens' rights but also the rights of the citizens from the Vishegrad Group, Greece, Croatia and Romania. We are facing the threat of "Two-standard Europe" in addition to the already existing "Two-speed Europe".

In our opinion the double standard of goods infringes the Law of the EU, specifically Regulation (EU) № 1169/2011 on providing information to consumers about foodstuffs as well as Directive 2005/29/EO regarding unfair commercial practices.

The double-standard issue was a key topic for discussion during the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2018.

I, in the capacity of National Ombudsman, organized a high level European forum with the participation of ministers and

representatives of institutions from member-states. At the forum Mrs. Vera Jourova presented The New Deal for Consumers where the double-standard issue occupies a significant place. It was at this forum that Mrs. Jourova announced the end of the double-standard practice and the commitment of the European Commission to propose amendments to the EU legislation, particularly the Directive on unfair commercial practices (USPD), so that such unfair commercial practices are crossed out for good.

A positive step ahead was the report on the dual quality of foodstuffs, considered by the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection. I fully agree with the recommendations on this important and comprehensive document. I would like to commend the European Commission, European Parliament and especially the Bulgarian MEPs for their goodwill to cease this offensive practice for the consumers.

I think that the dedicated EUR 2 million for carrying out national tests and for the elaboration of a unified methodology is crucial. Some producers have already canceled this offensive practice which proves how unacceptable it is.

I would like to express my satisfaction about the fact that nine months later after the forum in Sofia and the declared intention for changes, The New Deal for Consumers is put for consideration and vote in the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection. We hope that by the end of this mandate there will be sufficient time so that the European Parliament can adopt this Consumers` package. This will be the first step ahead in resolving the double standard problem with foods of identical brands.

However, the legislative proposal allows for insignificant deviations in the composition and quality of products of identical brands. In this way the ban on the double standard can be bypassed because who can say whether five percent less milk and five percent less cocoa in the chocolate bar is a significant deviation? That is why we insist the petition to remain open so that there will be a mechanism for monitoring of this process.

My colleagues and I will continue to demand the full ban on manufacturing and distribution of products of identical brand with different composition. We will also insist on the establishing of an unified body at EU level to control the ban and sanction the violators. We have our concerns that national authorities will be able to cope with the strong economic interests in this area. I am convinced that the ban on double-standard of foods of identical brands is in full compliance with the best consumers' interests in all EU member-states and will contribute to strengthening citizens' trust in the EU institutions.

Thank you for your attention!