

New EU-wide tests to tackle 'food apartheid'

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Food corporations have been using the same label to sell products of inferior quality than in Western member states

Brussels is rolling out new tests to target inferior versions of the same food products in different member states, EU Consumer Affairs Commissioner Vera Jourova said Monday.

They were developed following an outcry in some eastern European countries, where recent comparisons of food samples showed that big Western brands use cheaper ingredients in products sold in former communist countries.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, will roll out the tests across all member states in the coming days for immediate use, Jourova said.

"We hope to present the first results of this EU-wide testing by end-year," she told a forum on the issue in Sofia, organised by Bulgaria as part of its EU Council presidency.

"We want the [consumers](#) to see the fair EU in their shopping basket as soon as possible... meaning the same quality everywhere on the single market," Jourova added.

Recently published results of tests in Bulgaria showed differences that ranged from less cocoa and butter in chocolate to the use of fructose-glycose syrup rather than sugar in soft drinks.

In addition, a price comparison showed that consumers in the EU's poorest member state often paid more for the same [food products](#) than consumers in richer members.

Results in other eastern European countries have found—among other discrepancies—a lower amount of caffeine in coffee and less fish in fish fingers.

In response, Brussels has proposed a "new deal for consumers" outlawing the practice—referred to as "food apartheid" by affected countries—and which would introduce harmonised penalties in the case of cross-border infringements.

Jourova said Monday she hoped to push this new legislation through the European parliament by early 2019.

"There must not be second-class citizens in the EU. It is unfair and it is humiliating," she pointed out, reiterating a keynote statement of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker last September condemning the practice.

The companies involved have sometimes claimed that any differences across the continent merely reflect variations in local tastes.

"There might be objective reasons,... but the producers should be able to explain the objective reasons," Jourova said.

"If they are not able to explain that or give evidence, the authorities should start the procedure against such producers... for unfair commercial practice," she added.

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