

Commission warns against shift towards protectionism in agri-food sector

Struggling to cope with the fallout of the COVID-19 outbreak, countries across the EU are increasingly considering protectionist measures, promoting national agri-food products and discouraging imported products.

That has prompted the European Commission to express concern about the effect this would have on the free movement of goods and services in the internal market.

The internal market is “our strongest asset in ensuring supplies across the EU” a Commission spokesperson told EURACTIV.com, adding that no member state has the capacity to meet all its own needs for all products.

The Commission is “urgently addressing intra-EU export bans and restrictive measures by member states,” and could resort infringement proceedings against non-compliant member states, the spokesperson added.

“We are very vigilant and closely monitoring any reports of blockages in the Single Market. We are in constant contact with all Member States to ensure any measures are in line with EU.”

Another Commission source told EURACTIV that it is one thing to call for people to consume locally, but a different matter to take measures that might hinder the internal market.

EURACTIV Bulgaria recently reported that Deputy Prime Minister Krasimir Karakachanov proposed a ban on imports of foreign food products on 10 April and urged the government to stop the import and sale of fruits and vegetables until locally grown supplies are exhausted.



Bulgarian Minister of Agriculture, Desislava Taneva, also said that he wants to impose administrative rules that will oblige supermarkets to reserve one half of their shop exclusively for domestically produced food. Both moves could fall foul of EU competition rules and free movement of goods.

Czech Agriculture Minister Miroslav Toman called for consumers to give preference to Czech food products in his statement published Monday (20 April), saying “each one of us can help them with sales, therefore I want to call everybody to prefer Czech food products while shopping in the stores or to support local farmer by direct buying from his farm.”

In an interview on Saturday (18 April), although the German agriculture minister, Julia Klöckner, spoke out against what she called “consumption nationalism.” She also said that it is “good to place more emphasis on seasonal, local fruit and vegetables without immediately calling for consumer nationalism.”

Meanwhile, in Austria, the government has also been advocating greater sale and consumption of Austrian food products.

The Greek Ministry of Health and Epidemics scientific spokesman has also suggested that citizens expand their Greek diet as a healthier response to COVID-19 outbreak, and some local chambers of commerce have campaigned to increase consumption of local products during the crisis.

Lastly, in his speech announcing his government’s response to the coronavirus outbreak, French President Emmanuel Macron said that France needs to “rebuild French agricultural independence” after the outbreak.

This shift towards nationalist consumerism follows a warning from Maximo Torero, chief economist of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, who told the Guardian in March that protectionist measures by national governments during the coronavirus crisis could provoke food shortages around the world.

“Now is not the time for restrictions or putting in place trade barriers. Now is the time to protect the flow of food around the world,” he added.



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