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Worrying decline of food controls in Europe, new BEUC report reveals

The number of food controls and the resources allocated to them are dwindling across Europe. This is the worrying trend that emerges from the report 'Keeping food in check', published today by BEUC, The European Consumer Organisation.¹

In order to verify that businesses comply with EU food safety and labelling laws, BEUC calls on governments to increase resources for controls and on the EU Commission to ensure that Member States' reporting is complete, easy to access and comparable across countries.

All Member States are required by law to report on their inspection activities every year. BEUC analysed data on official food controls from 12 countries.² Here are the main findings:

- With some rare exceptions, human and financial resources for food controls are decreasing across the EU, as are the number of checks;
- Some control staff have flagged that they lack the necessary resources to carry out their duties;
- Controls of the foods most likely to cause poisoning – such as eggs, milk and meat – are decreasing;
- Member States' patchy reporting makes comparisons difficult, if not impossible;
- Member States give low to no priority to labelling checks;
- Few countries choose to publish the results of inspections of individual operators and to inform consumers about hygiene standards in restaurants and food shops.

Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC, commented:

"Our report shows that national governments are regrettably cutting corners when it comes to checking the vital resources that are our food. Even products prone to causing food poisoning – such as meat, eggs and dairy – are subjected to fewer and fewer controls. Several scandals have recently hit the headlines, including tainted baby milk and eggs as well as meat unfit for human consumption. Consumers then legitimately wonder whether governments are effectively ensuring that businesses play by the rules – and whether they have the means to do so. Consumer mistrust in food products ultimately harms businesses and the economy as a whole."

On transparency:

“New EU rules to harmonise Member States’ reporting on food controls will soon kick in.³ These rules will make it easier to compare countries’ performances and to help spot those who are not taking their control duties seriously enough.”

“Scores on the doors, ‘smileys’ and similar hygiene rating schemes help consumers decide where to eat and buy food. Yet, the new EU food controls law leaves it optional for Member States to develop such tools. Some countries already lead by example;⁴ we hope that more will follow.”

On funding:

“In a Single Market where food may cross several borders before it ends up on our plates,⁵ we cannot afford weak links in the control system. All Member States must allocate adequate resources to food checks in order to protect Europeans’ health. Regrettably, they missed an opportunity to obligate a greater number of food businesses to fund controls with the reform of the law five years ago.”⁶

Background

The revised [Official Controls Regulation](#) (2017/625) will bring in the main following [changes](#):

- **Increased transparency** for the official control activities carried out by Member States, including the introduction of a standard form to report on their annual control activities;
- More specific rules to target **fraud**;
- The obligation for Member States to perform **regular and unannounced** risk-based controls;
- **Higher fines:** Financial penalties targeting fraudulent behaviour will reflect the economic advantage of the fraudster, or a percentage of his/her turnover;
- **Individual evaluations:** Member States will be able (but not obligated) to publish information about the outcome of official controls on individual operators, as well as rating scheme systems for food businesses.

¹ The report does not aim to be (nor should it in any way be considered as) a comprehensive study.

² Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, UK.

³ The Official Controls Regulation (EU) 2017/625 will apply as of 14 December 2019.

⁴ Including the UK, Denmark and Norway.

⁵ The report covers official controls performed by Member States on food businesses operating in the EU. It does not deal with food import checks, which are subject to specific rules. Whether food that is imported into the EU is sufficiently controlled could be the focus of separate research.

⁶ The EU Commission had proposed extending mandatory fees to most official controls performed on food businesses (except very small ones); this [was however not supported](#) by the Council.

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