



## When Hygiene Constrains Quality

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**Producing safe food is sacrosanct, but when applied with no flexibility, hygiene regulations and packages can end up creating more damage for local products than benefits to food safety...**

All 15 of us struggle to fit inside Hristo Kostovski's small butcher's shop, as he explains to us the secrets of cured pork production in Kruševo, one of the highest towns in the Balkans. The sausage of the same name, known all over Macedonia, has been produced here for at least a century. With his large hands, Hristo shows us the lesser cuts of pork and beef that go into the sausage, along with leeks and many herbs and spices, including mint and allspice. Hundreds of sausages at different stages of aging hang from the walls around us.

"The passion of a lifetime is in this work," he says proudly. "But since our country has started conforming to the European regulations, I can no longer use local meat, butchered at home. So I have to buy frozen meat, slaughtered hundreds of kilometers away, sometimes even imported from abroad. Only that will meet the HACCP requirements." He adds: "But this meat is not good quality, and I have to choose between following tradition and risking expensive fines, or making Kruševo sausage that is from Kruševo only in name."

Hristo Kostovski is not alone in having to deal with overly strict legislation regarding hygiene and consumer safety in food production, particularly for processed products. The problem affects the whole region, with tens of thousands of producers relegated to the black market, simply ignored or, worse, facing obstruction from the relevant authorities. The Terra Madre Balkans network has been saying it for years. Now, however, the disproportionate investments demanded of small-scale producers in order to legally remain on the market have also become a problem in other EU countries, from Spain to Lithuania, and for almost all EU candidates. One would almost think that the big food scares of recent years, from the horsemeat scandal to the blue mozzarellas, were the fault of small-scale artisanal production, not industrial factories...

This situation led to the organization of a international workshop, "Local Food Matters,"\* by **Forum Synergies** and **Slow Food Bitola**, within the **ESSEDRA** project. The workshop featured guests from most EU member states and candidate countries, who came together to work out how to find a good balance between food-safety and hygiene laws and protecting small-scale food production. Two days of debate, presentations and field visits that helped the many attending civil society organizations work out a strategy for safeguarding small-scale artisans. Even though the local authorities all too often refer to European regulations to justify their severity in applying the law, there are plenty of positive examples from around the EU.

Silence fell in the meeting room when Christian Jochum, from the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture, described how Austrian legislation applied the European regulations with an innovative, flexible approach, aimed at guaranteeing consumer health through simple but effective procedures for the country's 46,000-plus small-scale food producers. Burcu Gezeroglu, a young Turkish delegate, was struggling to believe it: "Our authorities don't support small-scale food producers, they act like police inspectors. They show up, find examples of non-compliance, issue fines, sometimes close the business, and then go back behind their desks."

The problem, therefore, is not the rigidity of European regulations, but their application in member states and candidate countries. Even the European Commission by now recognizes that the flexibility provisions in the so-called "Hygiene Package" have not been adequately implemented. This is why the over 60 participants, each representing European and national institutions or civil society organizations, jointly released a declaration asking the European Commission to remedy matters as soon as possible.

As Oliver Emmes of Forum Synergies summed up: "The Commission must do everything in its power to ensure that the flexibility provisions become obligatory for all member states, and they must be written in a clear and explicit way." But that's not enough. "We also need the European Union to create ad-hoc offices to help the relevant authorities in the respective countries to actually apply the flexibility." After the meeting, we go for dinner. The restaurant serves us home-made Kruševo sausages: more flavorful and fragrant, but exquisitely illegal. For how much longer depends on us and our idea of Europe.

\*On February 4, 2014 the EP plenary adopted the resolution, on the future of small agricultural holdings drafted by MEP Czesław Siekierski. In this resolution MEPs urge further to focus also on tools such as public funds for small farmers who often cannot access EU funding. Another suggestion is to establish some financial tools and involve regional or local authorities in providing such support. Smallholders should also enjoy free advisory services, more technical assistance. The Parliament is calling for infrastructure development to help boost direct farm sales, such as traditional products on local and regional markets. More info: [www.europarl.europa.eu](http://www.europarl.europa.eu)

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