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Economic problems of dual quality of everyday consumer goods

Abstract. The dual quality of everyday consumer goods has been proven in the EU, although a geographical pattern dividing the EU into eastern and western parts has not been confirmed. This practice of some manufacturers is mainly mentioned from legislative and ethical points of view, yet its economic impact is also not negligible. It often happens that a consumer buys goods in his country in the same or very similar packaging as consumers abroad, however with a different composition (made with lower quality cheaper raw materials, containing a smaller proportion of basic raw materials or with a lower content of goods). The consumer can thus ask why he gets less or a lower quality product for his/her money than consumers abroad. In our research, we focused on Slovak consumers' perception of the economic dimension of dual quality. According to the results of a survey of 987 respondents, 89% of the respondents have heard of dual quality and 84% of the respondents are concerned about this practice. Most of the respondents (44%) consider it to be an economic problem precisely because of the use of cheaper raw materials and other proportions of basic raw materials in goods. Based on the research results, we propose to incorporate a comparison of prices for goods (in terms of price per unit weight of goods and taking into account the quality and the price of raw materials used) into the uniform methodology of testing goods for dual quality adopted by the European Commission. Furthermore, we propose to include information on dual quality of goods and the use of different raw materials (which are locally available or are allowed in the country and facilitate the processing procedure) on the packaging, which should be taken into account in pricing.

Keywords: Dual Quality; Everyday Consumer Goods; Price

JEL Classification: Q18; M38; M31

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Економічна проблема подвійних стандартів якості товарів щоденного споживання

Анотація. У країнах ЄС підтверджується факт існування подвійних стандартів якості товарів щоденного споживання, проте підтвердження не знаходить поділ Європейського Союзу на східну та західну частини. Практика виготовлення товарів за стандартами подвійної якості окремими виробниками згадується переважно в законодавчій та етичній площинах. Разом із тим не можна ігнорувати й економічний вплив такої практики. Частими є випадки, коли споживач, купуючи товар у

своїй країні у такому самому або дуже подібному до оригіналу пакуванні, отримує продукт відмінний від того, який отримує споживач за кордоном, тобто такий, що виготовлений із дешевшої сировини, сировини нижчої якості, такий, що містить меншу частку основної сировини для виготовлення даного виду товару або ж оригінальний продукт, але зі зменшеною вагою. Таким чином постає питання, чому за однаковий обсяг коштів, сплачений за той самий товар в одній країні, споживач отримує менше товару або товар гіршої якості, порівняно з тим, що отримує споживач в іншій країні за такий самий придбаний товар.

Автори даного дослідження зосередили свою увагу на тому, як словацький споживач сприймає економічний вимір явища подвійних стандартів якості. Відповідно до результатів проведеного опитування 987 респондентів 89% споживачів у Словацькій Республіці чули про існування явища подвійних стандартів якості товарів щоденного вжитку. У той самий час 84% опитаних висловили стурбованість існуванням такої практики. 44% опитаних розглядають зазначене явище як економічну проблему саме через використання виробниками більш дешевої сировини, а також зменшення частки основної сировини під час виготовлення відповідної продукції.

За результатами проведеного дослідження його автори пропонують включити в методіку Європейської Комісії стосовно тестування товарів на подвійні стандарти якості порівняння ціни за одиницю ваги товару з урахуванням якості та ціни використовуваної сировини. Окрім цього автори пропонують маркувати пакування товарів інформацією про відмінності у стандартах якості продукції та відмінності у використанні сировини, яка є доступною та дозволеною в визначеній місцевості й сприяє процесу виробництва цієї продукції, що має бути враховано при ціноутворенні.

Ключові слова: подвійні стандарти якості; товари щоденного споживання; ціна.

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Економіческая проблема двойных стандартов качества товаров ежедневного потребления

Аннотация. В странах ЕС подтверждается факт существования двойных стандартов качества товаров ежедневного потребления, однако не находит подтверждения географическое разделение Европейского Союза на восточную и западную части. Практика производства товаров по двойным стандартам качества отдельными производителями упоминается преимущественно в контексте законодательной и этической плоскостей. Вместе с тем нельзя игнорировать экономическое влияние такой практики. Нередки случаи, когда потребитель, покупая товар в такой же или подобной упаковке у себя в стране, получает продукт, отличающийся от того, какой получает потребитель за рубежом. Это подразумевает то, что потребитель получает продукт, отличающийся по своему составу, то есть продукт, изготовленный из более дешевого сырья низкого качества или такой, что содержит меньшую долю основного сырья, используемого для изготовления данного вида товара, или же оригинальный продукт, но с меньшим весом. Таким образом возникает вопрос, почему потребитель за один и тот же объем потраченных средств на приобретение того же товара в одной стране получает меньшее количество данного товара или же товар более низкого качества по сравнению с тем, что получает потребитель в другой стране.

Авторы данного исследования сосредоточили свое внимание на том, как словацкий потребитель воспринимает экономическое измерение явления двойных стандартов качества. Согласно результатам проведенного опроса 987 респондентов 89% потребителей в Словацкой Республике слышали о существовании явления двойных стандартов качества товаров ежедневного потребления. В то же время 84% опрошенных выразили обеспокоенность существованием такой практики. 44% опрошенных рассматривают указанное явление как экономическую проблему, связанную с использованием производителями более дешевого сырья, а также с изменением пропорций основного сырья при изготовлении соответствующих товаров. По результатам проведенного исследования его авторы предлагают включить в методіку Европейской Комиссии, касательно тестирования товаров на двойные стандарты качества, сравнение цены за единицу веса товара с учетом качества и цены используемого сырья. Кроме того, авторы исследования предлагают маркировать упаковку товаров информацией, касающейся отличий в качестве продукции и различий в сырье, доступном и разрешенном к использованию на определенной местности, что способствует развитию производства данной продукции и должно быть учтено в процессе ценообразования.

Ключевые слова: двойные стандарты качества; товары ежедневного потребления; цена.

1. Introduction

Dual quality is not a new phenomenon. It originated as a natural phenomenon in the 1990s, after the fall of communism. The end of the socialist regime, the establishment of democracy and the opening of borders in the states of the former Soviet Union opened up the markets of these

countries for foreign producers. However, they had to adapt the composition and properties of their products to the requirements of new markets, especially from an economic point of view, as living standards were low there and it would not be possible to sell foreign products made with the use original recipes. Developed countries accepted high quality products as one of the main sources of their national wealth (Marchuk & Fabiianska, 2017). However, the situation has changed: living standards are slowly levelling off and the countries of Central and East Europe (CEE) are no longer satisfied with the lower quality of goods, which in Western countries have a different composition, but are often sold in the same or very similar packaging. Dual quality has an impact on customer satisfaction, and consumers prefer goods which satisfy preferences (Natorina, 2017).

The issue of dual food quality has three levels. The first level is legislative. Manufacturers argue that there are certain rules and regulations for the production of products, given nationally or internationally, and they do not violate these rules. If different raw materials are allowed in different countries, manufacturers will adapt to this regulation and choose the most advantageous option. At the same time, manufacturers claim that they state all the information on the packaging and by doing so comply with all regulations.

The second level is the ethical one. Manufacturers provide the details concerning the ingredients of their products on the back of the packaging. This information is not always read by consumers. If consumers buy the same product in different places, they assume that it is the same. It follows from the nature of consumer behaviour that the more the consumer knows a product, the less information he seeks about it and the less he reads its packaging and the information on it. It is, therefore, a problem of corporate social responsibility towards their customers (Bartková, 2011).

The third problem in the context of dual quality is the price of goods (Bartková, 2019). It happens that products in the same package with different composition are sold at a different price, and there have been cases where goods produced with the use of cheaper raw materials in one country were more expensive than goods containing more expensive raw materials of better quality in another country. Also, there have been cases when goods in the same or very similar packaging have a different weight at a comparable price in one country, i.e. consumers received less goods at the same price, or there is a different ratio of basic raw materials, respectively a fixed share of goods. This also means that a customer in one country gets less for the same amount of money if compared with a customer in another country. However, it should be noted that the price analysis of goods in the same or very similar packaging purchased in different EU countries has tended not to be examined; the results are therefore not comparable and no clear conclusion can be made. Therefore, consumers have not been informed well whether the difference in price matches the difference in quality or not (Sisto et al., 2019).

Dual quality is an actual issue that is being addressed at the European countries (EC) level, which some politicians in certain Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries consider to be their personal victory. However, this is a broad problem that involves other stakeholders (Mints et al., 2020). Consumer opinions on this topic were surveyed in the Czech Republic, where the population expressed a negative opinion, and in Poland (PL), where most respondents had no experience with dual quality. In the Slovak Republic, research on consumer behaviour in the context of dual quality was lacking.

2. Brief Literature Review

The Slovak Republic was the first country to perform a test in 2011 comparing goods with the same or very similar packaging purchased in the Slovak Republic, Germany, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary. The test proved that some foodstuffs bought in Slovakia and abroad did not have the same taste, contents and even weight. According to the results of the test, the quality of the same products was generally worse in the so called new EU member states, while, on the other hand, the quality of goods purchased in supermarkets in Germany and Austria reached the highest standards (Bartková et al., 2018).

Several similar comparative tests were subsequently performed in different countries. In the Slovak Republic, a similar test was carried out in 2016, when out of 22 tested products only 9 had the same composition (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2017). In 2017, 33 pairs of samples of identical products were purchased in Slovakia and Austria. No difference was found for six products, whereas differences affecting quality to a lesser extent were

found for 11 products and larger differences which significantly affected quality were found for 16 products. One product was of better quality in Slovakia than in Austria (Sladkovská, 2017).

In the Czech Republic, similar tests were performed in 2015 and 2017. In 2015, 24 pairs of food and beverages purchased in the Czech Republic and Germany were tested. For a third of all the samples, the test revealed different quality (Kořínek & Hovorka, 2015). In 2017, 21 pairs of products purchased in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Germany and Austria were tested. Only three products were the same, 13 brands were different, five were slightly different and five products had different volumes with the same packaging (Ferebauer, 2017).

The dTest magazine, which tests food and non-food products, is dedicated to product research, and especially to testing the dual quality of goods. In the years between 2016 and 2019, the magazine tested 17 products, of which 13 differences were found. In several cases, however, the composition of goods was better in the Czech Republic than in Germany (DE). However, the tests used a different methodology; sometimes it was not a laboratory test at all, the quality was read only from labels that did not provide all the data in the same way and, therefore, some data were determined only probably (dTest, 2018). Hence, it was not possible to obtain correct results of those tests.

Another country, where another comparative test took place in 2017, was Hungary. The results of the comparison of 96 products did not reveal numerous violations of the law, but significant violations of ethical principles. Many of the tested products did not have the same composition as identical products sold in the West (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2017). However, the price survey was not the subject of testing.

In Poland, they performed two tests in 2017 and 2018 basing on a sample of 104 products purchased in Poland and Germany (chips, soft drinks, juices, cheeses, yoghurts, tea, coffee, frozen pizza, ketchup, chocolate, frozen fish and meat products) in stores of the same brand in Poland and Germany. Tests revealed 12 products that had different properties. The packaging of chips in Poland was 25 g less for the same price. Also, while German chips were fried in sunflower oil, the Polish ones were fried in palm oil. Polish chocolate contained fewer nuts than German chocolate. According to the test results, consumers in Poland received a lower weight of food at a comparable price, or food made from cheaper raw materials than consumers in Germany. However, the sample size was too small to relate results to the entire market (Office of Competition and Consumer Protection of Poland, 2018).

In 2017, comparative tests were also conducted in other countries. In Croatia, a test comparing 23 food products and 5 products from the category of cleaning, washing and personal hygiene was performed. Significant differences were found for six products (meat and dairy products, baby food, hazelnut spread, gummy candies and washing powder) and in 12 cases no differences in quality were found. Small differences were found in the remaining cases, especially with regard to the level of information provided on the packaging (Niamh, 2017). In seven cases, the goods purchased in Croatia were more expensive than those in Germany, e.g. in the case of baby food, the cheaper German product contained more vegetables than the basic raw material compared to the more expensive goods from Croatia.

In 2017, they tested 29 products purchased in Romania, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. 9 of them had a different composition. Those included pork products, canned fish, pâtés and ham. Further two tests took place in Bulgaria in 2017. Out of the first 30 tested products, 7 had a different composition; out of another 31 tested products, 6 had significant differences in composition. In 2018, the third Bulgarian test was performed. It proved that 13 out of 51 products had a different composition (The Sofia Globe, 2019).

In 2019, a similar test was conducted in Lithuania and Slovenia. In Lithuania, out of 33 food products, 23 products had a different composition. In Slovenia, 11 products were tested and no differences were found (AsktheEu, 2018).

Since each of the tests was performed by using a different methodology and neither representative nor the one containing comparable results, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission prepared a uniform testing methodology, which was tested in 2018 basing on a sample of 1,380 pieces of 128 different products in order to unify the research methodology and propose measures (European Commission, 2019; Barbu, 2019). The results of the test show that there are differences in the composition of products packaged in the same or very similar packaging, yet the geographical pattern has not been confirmed (Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic, 2019; Joint Research Centre of European Commission, 2019). Germany,

Austria and Italy were not involved in the test. The price comparison of the goods was not the subject of this test. Therefore, no consequences can be drawn.

3. Purpose

Based on the uniform methodology for testing goods, the EC included dual quality in 2018 on the list of unfair commercial practices. This means that marketed goods in one member state identical to goods marketed in other member states, having significantly different compositions or characteristics, unless justified by legitimate and objective factors, are considered a misleading commercial practice (EC Directive 2019/2161). The Directive also regulates sanctions for such violations. However, it will only be possible to prohibit dual product quality if a different composition is not justified by legitimate and objective factors, such as the availability or seasonality of raw materials, improving access to healthy and nutritious foods or traders' right to offer goods of the same brand in different geographical markets in packages of different weights or volumes (TASR, 2019). However, the Directive regulates neither different prices in the context of dual quality, nor the valuation of products of different weight or volume under the same price.

The economic dimension of dual quality in the scale in which it is presented in this paper is not addressed by the uniform methodology issued either by the EC or the legislation applied in any of the individual EU member states. In addition, according to a research on secondary sources, the topic of dual quality has so far been addressed mainly by politicians from CEE countries, with some views suggesting that politicians have sought to overlap other issues in countries with the issue of dual quality. Manufacturers have not been widely involved in solving the problem. Minimal attention has been paid to consumers despite the fact that they are the most important stakeholders in view of the whole problem.

The survey of consumer opinions took place in the Czech Republic where consumers stated that the practice hindered them (ČTK, 2017), as well as in Poland where most respondents did not encounter cases of dual quality (Forbes, 2019). However, the economic performance of manufacturers offering dual quality products suggests that although consumers perceive the problem, their consumer behaviour is not reflected. The purpose of our research is to find out whether consumers in the Slovak Republic perceive dual quality of everyday consumer goods and whether they are also aware of economic problem it brings. The partial goal is to find out whether the practice of dual quality hinders consumers and how they propose to resolve the problem.

4. Results

We conducted the research on a sample of 987 respondents through a questionnaire. In order to achieve the purpose of this research, a primary research was conducted during a period from September to December 2018 in the Slovak Republic basing on a sample of 987 respondents. The sample consisted of 513 females and 474 males. The largest group of respondents was those with an age between 26 and 45 years old and those with secondary education. The survey was conducted through a questionnaire which contained 21 questions, five of which were sociological, along with seven closed and nine semi-closed questions.

According to the research results, 89% of the respondents have heard about the problem of dual quality. The research also shows that this problem is important for up to 75% of the respondents. The majority of the respondents stated that the given practice hindered them, 12% of the respondents could not assess, and 4% of the respondents were not interested (Figure 1).

The majority of the respondents (72%), who knew about the problem of dual quality, had learned about it from the media. In addition, 43% of the respondents had had personal experience relating to the abovementioned practice, and 30% of the respondents had had an acquaintance with personal experience. One respondent stated that he had heard about this practice directly from an employee who was employed by a company that produces dual-quality goods. Most often, the respondents had heard (or had had experience) about dual quality in relation to meat and meat products, milk and milk products, sweets, detergents and cosmetics. Dual quality of goods can manifest itself in different ways. These may include a different composition of goods (e.g. glucose instead of sugar), a different ratio of basic raw materials to the total product (e.g. proportion of meat in ham, proportion of cocoa in chocolate), a different ratio of basic goods (e.g. proportion of cheese in brine or active substance content in washing powder), a different ratio of expected raw materials or properties (e.g. different proportion of alcohol), different processing of goods (e.g. for clothes), different weight of goods in the same packaging, different properties of goods

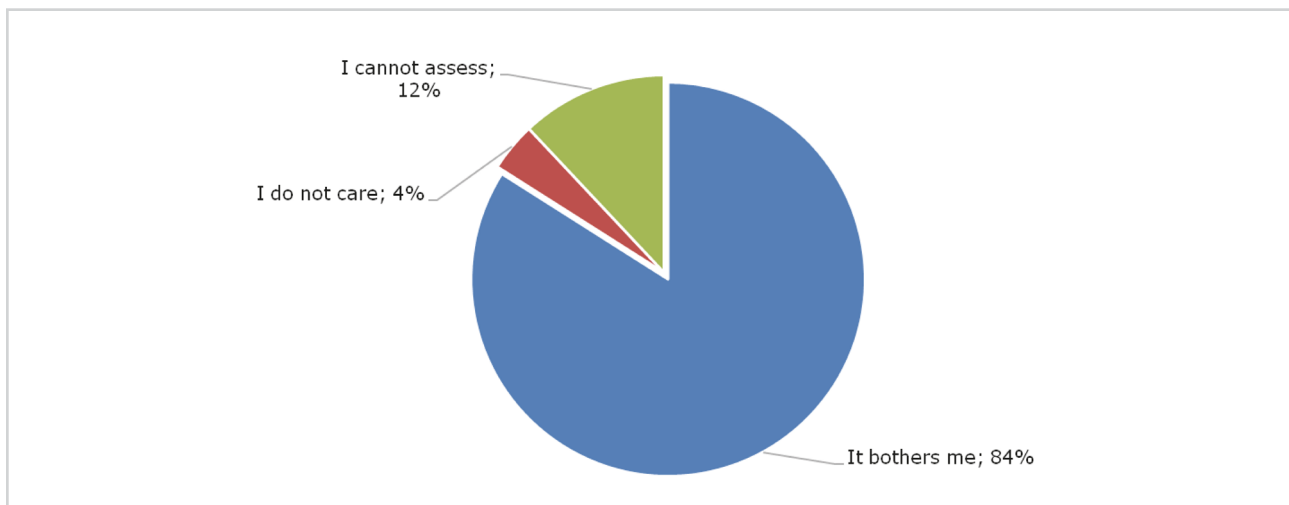


Figure 1:
Attitude of the respondents to the problem of dual quality
Source: Compiled by the authors

(crushed spices, moisture, roasted coffee beans, different size of pieces of fish meat, different smell, different consistency, etc.). Of the given inequalities, the respondents were most hindered by the different ratio of basic raw materials, a different composition of goods resulting from the use of different raw materials and the different ratio of basic goods in the total product (Figure 2). In this context, it is mainly an economic perception of the problem: why should one consumer get less (or a cheaper raw material) for the amount of money they paid than another consumer in a different country?

Most of the respondents consider the problem of dual quality to be an economic problem. In the second place, the respondents consider it an ethical problem and in the third place a legislative problem (Figure 3).

The majority of the respondents (77%) clearly stated that differentiation of products by packaging and price, which will correspond to the used raw materials, would be acceptable for them and could be considered to be a solution to the problem of dual quality of goods. As a second acceptable solution, the respondents (17%) mentioned differentiation of goods only by the inscription on the packaging and a different price. Thus, consumers themselves prefer a solution in which dual quality will be marked in some way on the packaging of the product and at the same time the price of the product will be adapted to its composition.

Consumers in Slovakia perceive this to be a problem and are not indifferent to it. Most have heard of this problem, especially from the media, and are not satisfied with it, especially with

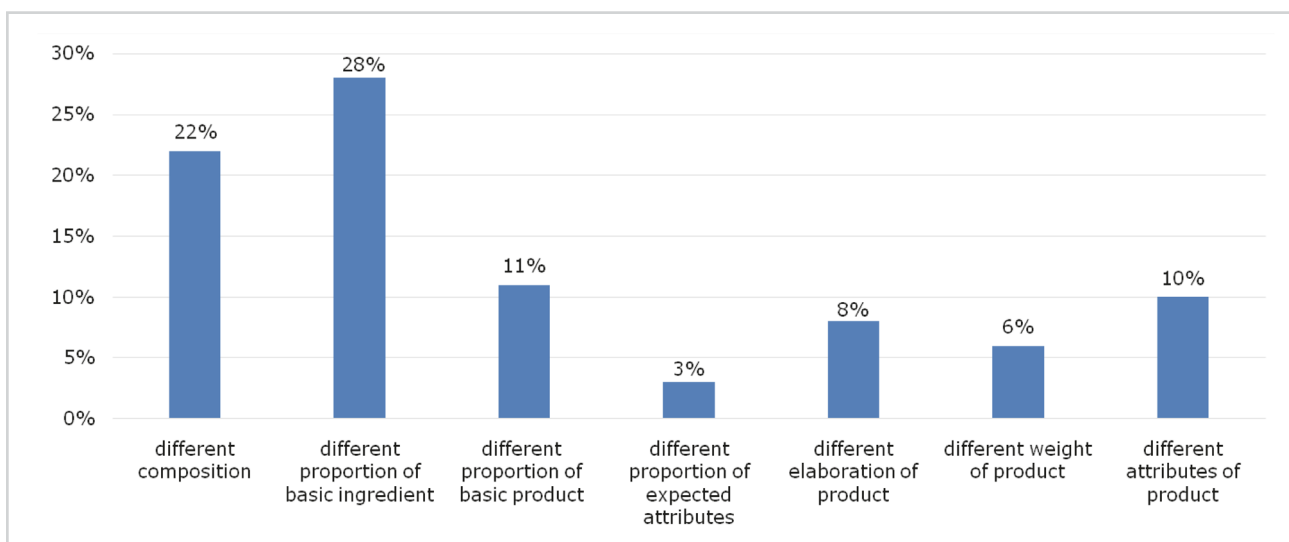


Figure 2:
Perception of differences by the respondents in the context of dual quality
Source: Compiled by the authors

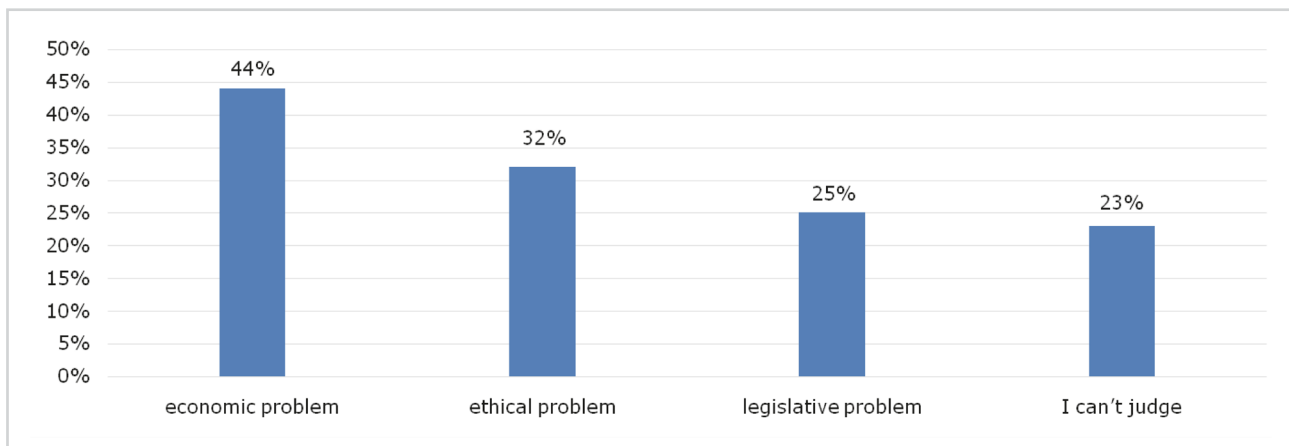


Figure 3:
Perception of dual quality as a problem by the respondents

Source: Compiled by the authors

regard to food. They are most hampered by dual-quality practices, when consumers in one country receive less quantity of goods, smaller amount of basic raw materials or cheaper raw materials in the same packaging. Most consumers consider the problem of dual food quality to be an economic problem. In their opinion, the best solution to the problem of dual quality is to mark such products with different packaging, or at least marking the packaging with appropriate information, or setting a different price corresponding to the quality.

Although the European Commission initially resisted interfering with issues relating to the dual quality of products, it prepared a change in the EU legislation under the pressure from the part of politicians from the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. The first step was to prepare a uniform methodology for the study of dual quality. This methodology was subsequently tested by the Joint Research Centre in 2018, which confirmed the existence of dual quality in the EU, but also did not confirm its geographical pattern which would divide Europe into East and West. The new methodology provides guidance for countries on how to proceed with product selection, sampling and testing. Food producers whose tests show differences will have to provide an explanation to the competent authorities (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2018). The same methodology should be gradually introduced for other types of products.

According to the new harmonized methodology, testing of goods for dual quality proceeds in three steps. The first step is to create a list of goods that will be tested. Information from previous campaigns and complaints (through consumer organizations and other available information) will be taken into account when compiling the list.

The draft product list is then consulted with brand owners on the availability and equivalence of goods in different markets. The design of the list of products to be tested shall also take into account the constraints imposed by special requirements for the handling of products and the feasibility of laboratory and sensory testing. The result of this testing phase is a list of products to be sampled.

The second step is sampling. The competent authorities will be responsible for sampling in accordance with national rules. This step will take place in retail outlets, where a sampling protocol will have to be drawn up; care will have to be taken to ensure that samples are of similar durability (although, as in the case of sour milk products, the age of the product is also important, since maturation changes the composition of dairy cultures, etc.) and, if necessary, the required special handling of goods will be ensured. The samples taken will be sent to the main organization for analysis.

The third step is the actual testing of goods. Testing of goods under the harmonized procedure begins by comparing the information declared on their labels. The comparison of the labels is followed by a sensory analysis, using an appropriate testing method. Based on the results of our research, we propose that in the third step a comparison of the prices of goods should be performed. In this comparison, we recommend to start with the recalculation of the price for the same unit of measure for the tested goods (e.g. grams). We also recommend taking into account the quality of basic raw materials and the quality of other used ingredients. The European Consumer Organization also recommends The European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC)

should collect information on the price of foods suspected of being sold under different quality (BEUC, 2018).

If the analysis of the composition and sensory properties shows differences, the owner of the mark shall provide an explanation to the competent authority. Under the amended Directive 2005/29/EC on unfair commercial practices, if the dual quality is demonstrated as unfair, the owner of the brand faces a fine of up to 4% of the annual turnover achieved in each of the countries concerned. We consider the intensification of communication with manufacturers and brand owners to be a positive step, as in the past the test results were presented mainly through the mass media (Bartková & Veselovská, 2020) and manufacturers did not always have the opportunity to comment on the issue.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of the paper was to find out whether consumers in the Slovak Republic perceive dual quality of everyday consumer goods and whether they realize its economic problem. The partial purpose was to find out whether they are concerned with dual quality and what they propose as a solution to this problem.

According to the results of the study, most of the respondents have already heard about dual quality, and they consider it to be a serious problem. Most of the respondents have heard about it from mass media. Dual quality is an issue of considerable concern for Slovak consumers mostly in the case of food products. Most of the respondents consider dual quality to be an economic problem, especially with regard to a different proportion of basic ingredients, different composition due to the usage of different ingredients and differences in the proportion of basic product in the whole product.

Most of the respondents reported that dual quality should not exist and manufacturers should offer uniform products in the EU markets. They do not exclude different products adapted to the specifics of individual countries, they only require such products to be properly labelled when packing the goods. The use of local raw materials (or raw materials allowed in a given country), differences in the purchase price and simplification of the processing process should also be taken into account when setting the price for such goods. Producers should be obliged to mark such products with a sign on the label saying that the product is produced for this very country or with a special local formula. In the previous research on dual quality, the analysis of its economic aspect was not conducted. We therefore propose to develop a uniform methodology to compare prices for dual-quality goods, carry out a price comparison and incorporate comparisons of the price level of related products into a harmonized European methodology for examining dual quality.

Based on this information, the main objective of the paper can be considered to have been fulfilled.

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