

Ban on Vegetable Imports Threatens to Derail EU Summit

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Fueled by harsh words from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Moscow's decision to ban all European vegetable imports because of a deadly E. coli outbreak is now threatening to derail relations with Brussels just days before a summit with EU leaders.

Putin spoke of "poisonous" cucumbers Friday in defending the ban announced a day earlier by the country's top sanitary official, Gennady Onishchenko.

Facts About E. Coli Outbreak

The deadly strain of E. coli that has killed at least 18 people in Europe and sickened 1,836 since May 2 has never been seen in a human population and may be the most toxic yet, health experts said. Here are answers to some frequently asked questions about the outbreak.

1. What is E. coli? Escherichia coli (E. coli) is a group of bacteria that live in the intestines of

many animals, including humans. Most strains are harmless, but others can cause illness ranging from diarrhea to pneumonia. E. coli infections can be mild to life-threatening.

2. How is E. coli spread? E. coli infections are caused by ingesting the feces of infected animals or humans, often via contaminated food or water. People can contaminate food by failing to wash their hands after using the toilet or changing a baby's diaper, although person-to-person infection is rare. Feces from animals, ranging from cows to birds, can contaminate water or crops.
3. What is the strain? The strain that is sickening people in Germany and other parts of Europe, known as O104:H4, is part of a class of bacteria known as Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli, or STEC. It is the first time the strain has caused an outbreak in humans. Symptoms of STEC infections vary for each person but often include severe stomach cramps, diarrhea (often bloody) and vomiting. Low fever (less than 38.5 degrees Celsius) also may be present. Most people recover within five to seven days.
4. What are the major complications of this strain? Hundreds of people sickened in the outbreak have developed hemolytic uremic syndrome, or HUS, a life-threatening complication of E. coli infections. The syndrome, which results in the destruction of red blood cells and severe kidney problems, usually arises about a week after diarrhea starts. Symptoms of HUS include decreased frequency of urination, extreme fatigue and the loss of the skin's pink color. Children, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems are usually at highest risk for HUS. In the case of this outbreak, healthy adult women have been hard hit.
5. What is the medical treatment? Experts said supportive therapy, including hydration, is important. Treatment for HUS includes dialysis for kidney failure and blood transfusions for anemia. Antibiotics should not be used, as there is no evidence that treatment with antibiotics is helpful. Antibiotics and antidiarrheal agents like Imodium also may increase risk of HUS.

— *Reuters, using data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

This may be against "the spirit of the WTO ... but cucumbers that people die from after eating really stink," Putin told a gathering of rail executives in Sochi.

He apologized to his audience for digressing to the subject at the end of a discussion about rail infrastructure, but said he had to address the "gathering scandal."

Putin was adamant that the ban would not be lifted before the Europeans pinpointed the source of the infection, which has killed at least 18 people and sickened 1,836 since May 2, mainly in northern Germany.

"We cannot for the sake of some spirit poison our people, since there are people dying from eating this produce," Putin said.

No one has been reported ill in Russia amid the outbreak, which health experts blame on a new strain of E. coli. Cucumbers were initially thought to be the source of the illness, and Germans have been advised to avoid all raw vegetables. But amid signs that infection rates were stabilizing over the weekend, some experts raised doubts over whether contaminated vegetables are the source.

The head of the EU delegation to Moscow, Fernando Valenzuela, criticized Russia's ban as unjustified and warned that it could undermine the country's chances of joining the World Trade Organization this year.

"I think we have to look at this situation positively and hope that it will be resolved within a few days, and consequently it should not have any influence on the WTO negotiations," he told reporters.

Valenzuela argued that if Moscow wanted to join the WTO, it should voluntarily adhere to its rules. "There is no point ... in waiting until the very last day to do that," he said, Interfax reported.

But the government rejected that notion.

Maxim Medvedkov, Moscow's top negotiator for the membership talks, said import restrictions on food that might harm people's health were in line with WTO rules. "Any WTO member is entitled to this, and Russia has and will have this right after joining the organization," Medvedkov said in comments carried by Interfax.

European officials complained that no other country has banned all vegetables from the 27-member bloc.

EU Consumer and Health Commissioner John Dalli demanded that the ban be lifted immediately, saying cucumbers were probably not responsible for the infections.

In a letter to Russian authorities, Dalli stressed that Brussels has kept and will keep Moscow and all other trade partners fully informed about developments, the EU said in an e-mailed statement Friday.

Officials also said the ban hurts not only European farmers but also Russian traders. The EU provides a third of the country's vegetable imports, and Valenzuela said the shipments amounted to a quarter of the EU's vegetable exports, worth nearly 600 million euros (\$877 million) last year.

"You cannot substitute this immediately," EU delegation spokesman Denis Daniilidis told The Moscow Times.

Moscow regularly prohibits food imports because of health concerns, and last week it also announced bans on Brazilian meat and Egyptian potatoes for not meeting sanitary standards.

Some previous embargoes have smacked of political punishment, like those on Georgian and Moldovan wine and on Belarussian dairy products.

But analysts suggested that the vegetable ban might just reflect Moscow's protectionist instincts.

"This supports domestic producers, which fits into Onishchenko's political strategy," said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, a think tank.

He said a little trade spat might actually be welcomed by the Kremlin. "I bet [President

Dmitry] Medvedev is smiling now — after the EU gave him such a hard time on security policy and visas," he said.

Russian officials have expressed frustration with the European Union after it largely ignored Medvedev's initiative for a new European security architecture and bowed to resistance from individual EU member states for visa-free travel.

The trade spat strikes at a particularly sensitive time because the European Union, which supports Moscow's WTO ambitions, wants to discuss progress on the negotiations at the EU-Russia summit, which kicks off Thursday in Nizhny Novgorod.

EU delegation spokesman Daniilidis said he hoped to keep the vegetable issue out of the political sphere and to have it solved before the summit. "If there is no solution by then, we would be in a very uncomfortable position because it distracts from our positive agenda," he said.

Analysts said they did not expect much substance from the summit, which is held twice a year.

EU officials have said they will issue a joint progress report on the Partnership for Modernization, a plan to swap European technology and know-how for Russian reforms. They also said much-touted agreement on common steps toward visa-free travel will not be signed because further consultations are needed inside the 27-member union.

Vladislav Belov, an analyst with the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, said the vegetable ban should be seen as a political opportunity instead of a threat. "It actually offers a nice chance to discuss soft security factors — how to cooperate during a dangerous outbreak," he said by telephone.

Meanwhile, Onishchenko, the top sanitary official, defended the ban Saturday and urged people to demand documentation from retailers showing the origins of their produce. "If the vegetables are from Europe, I advise you not to buy them," he said. "If you have any doubts, cook the produce."

Roland Oliphant contributed to this report from Sochi.

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