

Food Industry Aims to Get Tough on Cheaters

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Opora president Sergei Borisov, left, with Sberbank head German Gref at an Opora event in 2007.

A candidate who applied for work at Ivan Bukharov's restaurant at first seemed to be a good fit for the job.

His individual sanitary certificate, which is necessary for getting work in the Russian food industry, was in good shape, so he was hired as a waiter, the current president of the Federation of Restaurateurs and Hoteliers said.

Ten years later, Bukharov learned that his employee had tuberculosis. The certificate he had shown was counterfeit.

Such manipulations are widespread in the Russian food industry. Bukharov estimates that up to 70 percent of individual sanitary certificates are fakes.

It is cheaper to buy a counterfeit sanitary certificate than to pay for all the procedures

necessary to do the health checks, Gennady Onishchenko, Russia's chief sanitary doctor, said Wednesday at a news conference.

Medok, one of the state-accredited services for getting an individual sanitary certificate, charges food industry workers upward of 1,200 rubles (\$37) for the document.

Some of the fake books are issued through regular state organs that have been paid off to overlook the health of the applicant.

The Federal Consumer Protection Service and Opora, a small- and medium-size-business lobbyist group, are discussing ways to fix these shortfalls. Among the priorities is harmonizing rules for the inspection of food enterprises.

Food industry workers currently have to consult a plethora of guidelines drafted by Russian government organs, the customs union of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, and the World Trade Organization.

The abundance of guidelines, some of which diverge in their directives, confuses entrepreneurs, said Sergei Borisov, president of Opora.

Association members want the Federal Consumer Protection Service to develop a more European-style method of food inspections in light of Russia's upcoming WTO accession. Under this model, the inspector would be more of a consultant than a hard-line punisher.

"We need to take our repressive state system and turn it from an evil supervisor, who is corrupt on top of everything else, into a civilized consultant," said Opora presidium member Marina Bludyan.

Onishchenko agreed that changes in the inspection mechanism are needed, but he is not willing to cast aside all existing Russian regulations in favor of more international standards.

"I am not satisfied with the customs union regulations," he said. "They are written like European directives – very general phrases. Our laws are clear-cut, but their regulations are open to individual interpretation, which opens the window to corruption."

Onishchenko added that any changes in sanitary inspections will be made gradually so that businesses have time to adjust to the new requirements.

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