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Crackdown on Artificial Food Additives Ineffective, Say NGOs

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Non-profit organizations are accusing the government of not doing enough to protect consumers from potentially dangerous food additives despite a recent law that puts multiple restrictions on the use of such substances in edible products.

Russia has few laws regulating the use of artificial food additives, such as flavor enhancers, and the law that stepped into force on July 1 puts little pressure on food manufacturers, said Sergei Raksha, head of the non-governmental organization "Truth About Food."

The July law requires manufacturers to identify whether food additives and genetically modified organisms were used in their products. It also puts a limit on how many of these additives can be among the ingredients.

But the penalties for not obeying the law are too small to concern large producers, Raksha said.

"There are not enough laws, not enough political will, not enough control mechanisms," he said. "We have a lot of counterfeits on the market, lots of violations of the law, especially in the regions, but despite all this the punishment for rule-breakers is pitiful and not even consistently enforced."

The fine for not listing GMOs on packaging, for example, are about 20,000 rubles ($607), said Raksha.

The Liberal Democratic Party put forward a proposal to the State Duma in July that would force manufacturers to identify the use of the flavor enhancer glutamic acid (E 621) in food. The label must be displayed in large letters within a black frame — similar to the health warnings on cigarette packages, according to the document.

"Our counters are full with sausages made out of soy and starch, but without meat, and ice cream made out of palm oil, but without milk. Stop poisoning people with chemicals. We're not a third-world country!" Yaroslav Nilov, one of the proposal's authors, wrote in the explanatory note.

Hindering the incorporation of this proposal into the existing law is the fact that all the countries in the Customs Union would have to agree to the changes.

Raksha said he would like to also see restrictions on the use of artificial trans fats in foods, similar to the measures taken in Australia, Denmark and the United Kingdom. But he doubts that the Federal Consumer Protection Service will listen to his organization's recommendations.

His team has appealed to the agency before, only to be told that the officials were not interested in collaborating with civilian groups.

Now the organization's interaction with the Federal Consumer Protection Service consists of them sending the agency samples of food products that they have tested and found inadequate, Raksha said.

The agency gives a small fine to the product manufacturer, and the situation repeats itself again.

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