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France's Auchan Targeted in Food Checks Campaign

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Auchan's rapid and successful development in Russia proves that the authorities do not hold any grudges against the retailer.

Nationwide inspections of the French grocery retailer Auchan launched late last month by a government watchdog have evolved into a high-profile vilification campaign involving top Russian officials.

Political and industry analysts are divided over whether the pressure on one of Russia's biggest retailers is a way to send a signal to the European Union that has locked horns with Russia in a sanctions war over the conflict in Ukraine.

The latest salvo against Auchan came from the head of the State Duma security committee, Irina Yarovaya, who called for Auchan and other retail chains to respect both the law and customers by not offering "fake products and poison."

"It is astounding that Auchan representatives have not asked their customers to forgive them," she told journalists late Thursday, TASS reported.

In late July, inspectors of Rosselkhoznadzor, a government agency tasked with monitoring the quality of agricultural products, carried out unscheduled inspections of Auchan's hypermarkets in Moscow and the Moscow region, and reported numerous storage, processing and sales violations within Auchan's meat products.

The head of the agency, Sergei Dankvert, told Russian media that the probes into Auchan were ordered by Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich.

Following its initial report on July 30, Rosselkhoznadzor has methodically reported on violations discovered within four Auchan outlets.

Inspectors accused the retailer of misleading customers with meat labels showing expiration dates extending beyond the allowed limits in order to extend shelf-life.

Another inspection by Rosselkhoznadzor reportedly revealed that sausage beyond its expiration date was used on pizza in an Auchan supermarket, according to the watchdog's July 31 report.

On Aug. 4, Rosselkhoznadzor reported that its inspectors had found traces of pig, chicken and sheep DNA in Auchan's beef mince. Pork mince was also contaminated by chicken, sheep and even horse DNA, the agency said.

Out of the 47 samples of meat products collected, 35 did not comply with Russian food standards, the watchdog said in its statement.

The latest violation came from Perm on Friday when a local Auchan hypermarket was accused of selling Chilean salmon that lacked proper documentation, regional media reported.

While the retailer promised to fight the accusations, Auchan has acknowledged some of the reported violations and promised to fix them.

On Aug. 11, the retailer closed all meat-processing facilities for a 24-hour disinfection and has invited Rosselkhoznadzor to conduct further inspections of Auchan products.

Auchan's representatives declined to comment to The Moscow Times on the possible reasons behind the crackdown.

On Thursday, the head of Rosselkhoznadzor's branches in Moscow and the Moscow and Tula regions, Yevgeny Antonov, said in an interview with Moskva 24 television channel that his agency had received a letter from the French Embassy expressing its concern over checks in quality control at Auchan.

"We understand everything, but we are doing our job and the retailers have to do their job properly," the news station cited Antonov as saying.

Later that day, the French Embassy said in a press release that it had not "expressed concern" over Auchan, but confirmed that it had contacted Rosselkhoznadzor regarding the technical

details of the inspections.

Taking into account the recent mutual extensions of sanctions between the West and Russia, some experts suspect political motives behind the campaign's focus on the French retail giant.

"The inspections, the tightening of sanctions and destruction of prohibited Western food could all be links in the same chain," said Alexei Makarkin, vice president of the Center for Political Technologies, a Moscow-based think tank.

"This could be another signal to the West," he said.

Natalya Kolupayeva, a retail and consumer market analyst at Raiffeisenbank, disagreed.

"No politics can be involved here," she said.

Auchan's rapid and successful development in Russia proves that the authorities do not hold any grudges against the retailer, according to Kolupayeva.

One of the world's largest retailers, Auchan has operated on the Russian market since 2002. There are 88 Auchan hypermarkets in Russia and the company is one of the country's largest employers.

Kolupayeva suggested that the Auchan affair is the result of an increase in officials' attention toward all retailers amid challenging high inflation and food sanctions.

In any case, "Auchan will continue to work," Rosselkhoznadzor's Antonov told Moskva 24.

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