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Armenia, Georgia Battle Over Yogurt

The Caucasus neighbors have started a food fight over the fermented milk product that is the region's pride and joy.

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The Caucasus neighbors have started a food fight over yogurt **Giorgi Balakhadze (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

Armenian-Georgian relations have taken a sour turn over Georgia's refusal to allow Armenian yogurt to cross its border, deeming the dairy product to be an infringement of Georgian intellectual property. The move has reignited long-standing who-did-it-first tensions that flare up frequently between the two ancient neighbors.

The controversy began when a former prime minister of Armenia, Hrant Bagratyan, reported on social media that Georgia had begun barring entry to Armenian-made yogurt, a regionally famous dairy product that is known as *matsun* in Armenia and *matsoni* in Georgian. Bagratyan's post quickly spread and Armenian authorities confirmed the news, explaining that Georgians consider *matsun* to be an infringement on the intellectual property rights Tbilisi claims to *matsoni*.

Georgian officials said the story highlighted by Bagratyan in fact was about a single incident that occurred last year. "The customs department told us that there was a trailer at the border loaded with produce similar to produce that is patented produce in Georgia," Tengiz Kalandadze, chief of the Food Department at the Georgian Ministry of Agriculture, told RFE/RL.

"The law on intellectual property bars the usage of names similar to a patented name, and since the Armenian word *matsun* sounds too similar to Georgian *matsoni,* we sent the trailer back," he said.

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Georgia called dibs on *matsoni* in 2012 by copyrighting it as a "geographical indication," a protection mechanism that ties food products to specific a country or territory of origin. *Matsoni* has thus become to Georgia what champagne is to France and Scotch whiskey is to Scotland.

In practical terms, this means that *matsun* exports cannot reach Russia, a key outlet for Armenian produce, as Armenia's only land route to Russia runs through Georgia.

Armenian officials complain that no one asked them who *matsoni*/*matsun* belonged to. "Back in 2011, the intellectual property authorities of Armenia filed an objection against the registration of the name *matsoni* to the relevant bodies of the European Union and Georgia, arguing that this name can be confused with *matsun* produced in Armenia," Gayane Antonyan, a spokesperson for Armenian Ministry of Economy, told reporters in Armenia after the controversy kicked off. "However, the objection was not taken into account."

Matsun continued to get a free pass through Georgia until last year, but then Tbilisi began to more vigorously enforce its geographic indication protection laws, Armenian officials said. One Armenian dairy producer began branding its *matsun* as "Armenian mountain yogurt" in order to skirt Georgia's restrictions, Bagratyan reported.

While the two governments have since indicated that they are trying to come up with a solution, the episode prompted ordinary Armenians and Georgians spar over the "true" ownership of the yogurt, reigniting long-standing who-did-it-first tensions that flare up frequently between the two ancient neighbors.

"Why can't we just allow that both of us have been fermenting milk in a similar way for centuries and that it is perfectly normal that we have a similar word for it?" one voice of reason commented in a long thread on Facebook. "Matsuni and matsoni are brothers and so are we."

Armenians point out that the root of either word is the old Armenian word *mats* (to curdle, glue together). This view is in fact shared by some Georgian linguists, but for many in Georgia, the issue is less what scholars say and more the stereotype that Armenia's national sport is claiming ownership of just about everything in the region.

Then Georgia's main pro-government TV channel, Imedi, elevated the dispute into an

entirely new dimension.

In its report on the controversy, the network aired an image of a bottle of yogurt with *matsoni* written in Georgian and "Karabakh is Azerbaijan and dolma is also Azerbaijani" in Armenian. Dolma – known to Georgians and Armenians as tolma – is another food item hotly contested in the Caucasus, this time between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Karabakh, of course, is even more hotly contested and was the object of two wars between the countries, one in the 1990s and one in 2020.

The Armenian embassy in Tbilisi demanded an explanation for the story. Imedi later apologized, claiming it was a "technical error" because had it simply picked an image of the embattled yogurt off the internet without checking what the Armenian said, but the damage was done.

"Hell, let's just go to war with Armenia," joked one Georgian Facebook user in an angry reaction to the brouhaha on the social media. "History will say that Armenia and Georgia went to war over yogurt. Is this what you want?"

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