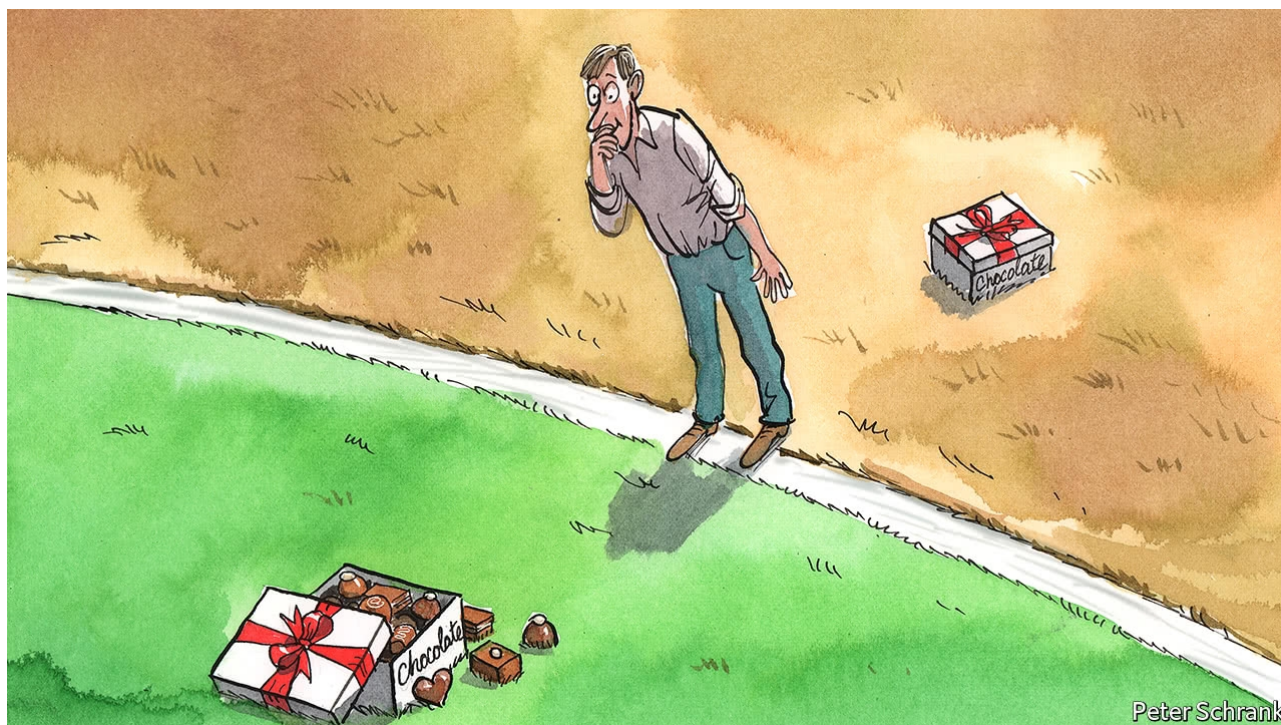


Charlemagne

Eastern Europeans think Western food brands are selling them dross

The “dual foods” furore hints at eastern mistrust of the west



Print edition | Europe

Jun 29th 2017

FOR some it is the cheese and yogurt; for others the fruit juice. But for Tibor Ferko, a young butcher from Usti nad Labem, a city in the northern Czech Republic, it is the chocolate that leaves him salivating at the chops. Mr Ferko gestures with near-Italian flamboyance as he recalls the “creamy” texture of the Milka bars available just across the German border but denied to him by the inferior product at home. A few miles away, in a supermarket off the Srbsice highway, Zdenek Kuklik vows never again to visit Czech shops for the Hipp baby food he feeds to the son clinging to his chest. Why? Because on the one occasion they bought locally he instantly spat the stuff out, explains his wife. From now on it will be strictly the superior product from across the border.

Suspicious that multinationals dump second-rate versions of the branded products they sell to westerners have a long pedigree across the ex-communist countries of eastern Europe. A mini-industry of angry consumer shows and cross-border shopping enterprises caters to consumers' frustrations. Thousands of those who live near the frontier vote with their feet. Czechs visiting German towns like Altenberg and Heidenau, where supermarket signs come in two languages, say they can find higher quality, more choice and often lower prices.

Latest updates

The travel order rules face a court challenge
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Mystery solved: it was the ball after all
GAME THEORY

Sofia Coppola on being a pioneer for women directors
PROSPERO

See all updates

No wonder politicians have spotted an opportunity. In February a Czech minister said his people were tired of being “Europe’s garbage can”, a metaphor that several Czech shoppers repeated unprompted to Charlemagne. Bulgaria’s prime minister compares food manufacturers’ treatment of east European consumers to apartheid—really. In March

Robert Fico, Slovakia’s prime minister, brought the issue up at a European Union summit. If Angela Merkel and Theresa May were dismayed to find themselves discussing the relative consistency of Nutella in Austria and Slovakia, they were polite enough to go along with it. The EU’s 28 leaders duly acknowledged the issue of “dual quality of foodstuffs” in their common statement. Now eastern governments are ordering studies galore to heap pressure on Brussels to act.

In fact, EU law already outlaws advertising or packaging that misleads consumers. But some eastern governments want rules that would in effect harmonise products across the single market, and threaten to go rogue if they do not get their way. A bill in Hungary would force manufacturers to slap labels on foodstuffs that differ in content from similarly branded stuff elsewhere. Food producers hope instead to soothe easterners’ anxieties with the balm of transparency, promising dialogue, support for more studies and opening up factories for visits. Boffins in Brussels are preparing a methodology for standardised tests that should help agencies across the EU ascertain the scale of the problem.

The European Commission says it does not yet see evidence of serious market anomalies. Food firms say that variations in their products result from factories’ sourcing decisions or differences in regional tastes. They deny offloading inferior products onto the poorer half of the continent. Coca-Cola substitutes fructose-

glucose syrup for cane or beet sugar in the Czech Republic, for instance, but also in Spain and America. Such claims are often just “excuses”, says Jiri Sir, the Czech deputy agriculture minister. What can justify the replacement of pork by reconstituted poultry in luncheon meat? Whoever said “there’s no arguing about taste” had clearly never been to Brussels.

By framing all this as a European problem, eastern governments may hope to distract from failings at home. “Czechs are passive consumers,” sighs Stefan Linek, a factory worker in Usti. Some differences exist only in consumers’ heads. Studies have detected no substantial variation between Milka chocolate in the Czech Republic and Germany, a finding corroborated by your columnist’s personal taste tests and by the respective lists of ingredients. Charlemagne’s commitment to journalistic rigour did not extend to sampling Hipp’s baby food, but the company confirms that its products are identical on either side of the border.

West is best?

But if the culinary concerns of the east are overdone, they may betray a deeper set of worries. Today western Europe is enjoying a rare spell of exuberance, but parts of the east are finding it hard to shake off old neuroses. Real wages have not converged with the west as quickly as some had hoped, and mass emigration has deepened demographic problems and skills shortages. Expressing his support for a recent strike at a Slovak Volkswagen plant, Mr Fico reprised a common theme: “Our western friends do not understand when we ask them why a worker in Bratislava... has a salary half or maybe two-thirds lower than a worker in the same firm 200km westward.” Pay or food, the concern is the same. Multinationals are taking eastern Europeans for a ride.

Do not be surprised to see the same apprehension surface inside the EU itself. Viewed from much of the east, the agenda taking shape in Brussels, from a fresh wave of integration for the euro zone to proposals for social legislation, looks decidedly unappetising. Emmanuel Macron, who marched to victory in France wrapped in the EU flag, may be the man of the hour in Brussels and Berlin. But his inflated attacks on eastern “posted workers”, who work temporarily in the west for lower benefits, have hardly endeared him to the other half of the continent.

Eastern Europe is not blessed with many heavyweights. Mr Fico shifts shape with the political wind, Czech voters are preparing to elect an agriculture tycoon, and the Polish and Hungarian governments cynically manipulate the EU’s refugee crisis

when they are not undermining their own countries' institutions. They cannot expect much sympathy for a problem they are gleefully exaggerating. Yet the leaders of western Europe should not allow all this to blind them to fears among easterners that the club they joined with such enthusiasm over a decade ago is running out of space for their concerns.

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "The chocolate curtain"