

Europe's horsemeat scandal is unfortunate, but it is not a full blown crisis.

Blog Admin

Recent weeks have seen concern among consumers about mislabelled products containing horse or donkey meat on supermarket shelves. [Wim Verbeke](#) argues that the presence of these products should not be of great concern. Since food safety does not seem to be an issue, the scandal is not likely to evolve into a full blown crisis, especially outside of the UK where horsemeat is not forbidden or taboo.



At the moment, "the horsemeat scandal is no reason to panic" according to Europe's national food authorities. While up until now, food safety has not been at risk, staying alert is still a wise course of action. Drugs and other substances commonplace in the horse sector are not the same as those used in conventional livestock, and it is these sorts of chemicals that are an important source of food-related worry among European consumers according to [Eurobarometer](#). Despite this, it is reassuring that residue analysis, which checks for chemicals, is easier and more routine, compared to tests on meat origin or authenticity tests, which require much more expensive and time-consuming analytical procedures. Given the testing regime, if there were any safety risks we can assume that we could or would have known by now.

In the meantime, consumers are being cheated by some producers and the already vulnerable image of the meat sector has been damaged once more. Most consumers do not manage to distinguish between different types of risk, and all meat is easily perceived as equally risky when problems arise anywhere in the meat sector. Fraud with one type of meat is easily confused with a risk of residues or bacterial contamination in another meat type. Previous crises have shown that such events lead consumers to shift away from meat, rather than to substitute one type of meat for another. Such behaviour is further amplified when the problem emerges into a real crisis.

Why the British market?

It seems legitimate to wonder why this fraud has been discovered only in the British market. This is perhaps a consequence of vigilance following Britain's now almost forgotten past experiences with beef, or super high vigilance due to the taboo over horsemeat in the UK. Perhaps the fraud had grown to such proportions that continental-European markets could no longer absorb the flood of horsemeat, meaning that the British market could no longer be disregarded.

One possible explanation is that horses and donkeys are no longer welcome in Romanian traffic, and have therefore lost their economic value, while remaining as expensive to keep as before. They are now too costly, so their meat is dumped elsewhere in Europe. While the meat of those unfortunate horses inevitably ends up somewhere, the British market is the very last one where one would expect this to happen. Were those producers negligent, simply keen on taking extreme risks, or intent on cheating British consumers? Is the UK ready-meal market so much more attractive than elsewhere in Europe; or did these products end up in



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the UK just by accident? I don't believe that any of these answers stand up. The continental-European markets have no doubt become saturated with this very welcome cheap ingredient, allowing producers to cut costs.

A genuine crisis?

Let's evaluate the horsemeat scandal against a simple checklist of ten elements of a genuine crisis. First, non-labelled use of horsemeat (instead of beef) leads to an involuntary exposure of consumers; given that the fraudulent composition of the product is obviously not communicated, this means that consumers are not able to make deliberate choices. Second and third, the source of the problem was initially difficult to identify and subject to uncertainty: horse and/or donkey meat, Romania or France, lasagne and/or other products, on the shelves or not? Fourth, the dimension of the fraud is universal, since several European countries are involved and the problem has expanded to a pan-European scale. Fifth, it concerns a combination of a technological hazard (fraudulent mixing of ingredients during food processing) and a possible bioactive risk (products of animal origin), which is a highly sensitive risk-combination with substantial potential to evolve into a crisis. Finally, there are some media-triggers such as the presence of suspects and a link with crime.

Three elements are still missing to guarantee a full blown crisis. This type of fraud is not new. The issue does not really frighten consumers since it is perfectly believable that cheap horsemeat is used instead of more expensive beef, and there is no major food safety problem. There have been hardly any contradictory statements, and the issue has scored low in terms of visual media attractiveness. Based on experiences with previous meat scandals, one could have expected images of discarded and neglected horses or horse abattoirs, but fortunately these have stayed in the archives in most European countries.

The score is seven out of ten: not bad, but insufficient for us to call it a full blown crisis in continental Europe. The scandal is particularly unfortunate for those who mean well by our food provision, for those who work hard defending some room for meat on consumers' plates, and for those who still take consumers and their own business seriously. The traceability in the food chain, which was established about 10 years ago, following problems in the beef chain, now must once again prove its usefulness. Preferably authorities need to do this with fast, effective and decisive measures to lift the concerns of consumers who still manage to appreciate meat, and to reassure those with good intentions involved in the food chain.

Readers may also be interested in the [FoodRisc](#) research project, led by University College Dublin, which studies food risk perception and communication. Wim Verbeke's research group at Ghent University is a partner with FoodRisc.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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