

Onishchenko's Departure Signals Stricter WTO Compliance

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The surprise dismissal last week of Gennady Onishchenko as head of the Federal Consumer Protection Service could indicate an increased willingness on Russia's part to abide by World Trade Organization, or WTO, requirements, a top U.S. business lobbyist said Friday.

As the head of Russia's consumer protection agency since 2004, Onishchenko banned a number of "harmful" food products from former Soviet republics, including Georgia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Moldova and Belarus, to support the Kremlin's political objectives. His sudden resignation has raised questions about the implications for Russia's trade policies in its near abroad and around the world.

One possible result that would hearten Russia's commercial partners is stricter adherence to rules set out by the WTO, which Russia joined in 2012 after years of accession talks.

"Onishchenko was a lightning rod for those who thought that Russia was dragging its feet

on the WTO," said Andrew Somers, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia. "I think that Onishchenko's resignation signals that Russia will be more consistent in its sanitary measures in terms of their compliance with international norms and their scientific basis."

Earlier this month, Russia was slammed at a WTO meeting in Geneva for its ban on Lithuanian dairy products, a measure that participants called neither proportional nor scientifically justified. European Commissioner for Trade, Karel de Gucht, has threatened to appeal to the WTO if the embargo persists.

Other bans initiated by Onishchenko, including those on Georgian and Moldovan wine, Belarussian dairy, and Ukrainian chocolates — all of which were instituted at the height of political disagreements — seemed to ignore science as well, breaching a prime WTO principle.

"Onishchenko has been banning foreign products without the scientific evidence the WTO requires," said Art Franczek, president of the American Institute of Business and Economics in Moscow.

Onishchenko's departure may also bring with it improvement in Russia's WTO compliance through a consolidation of the state agencies that deal with food inspection.

According to the WTO's treaty on sanitary measures, the organization's members are required to "harmonize sanitary and phytosanitary measures on as wide a basis as possible."

Currently, two state agencies — the Federal Consumer Protection Service, formerly headed by Onishchenko, and the Federal Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance Service — are mandated to protect Russians, each in its own way.

The consumer protection service conducts "human well-being surveillance" and safeguards the rights of consumers, while the veterinary and phytosanitary service focuses on the control of animal and other biological products. The two agencies, whose broad mandates have potential for overlap, have been battling over their prerogatives for some time.

Earlier this month, First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov announced the possibility of expanding the powers of the veterinary and phytosanitary service to cover finished food products. Finished food products had been under Onishchenko's authority since 2009.

Onishchenko, present at the meeting where Shuvalov made the announcement, defiantly gathered his personal belongings and left the room, according to Kommersant.

The Health Ministry may now attempt to take over some of the consumer protection service's functions as well. On Saturday, Health Minister Veronika Skvortsova said 80 percent of what the consumer protection service does is "sanitary and epidemiological" work, which she said would be logical to hand over to her ministry, Interfax reported.

A reorganization of food inspection agencies has been under consideration for several years. In 2011, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak suggested that the powers of the Federal Consumer Protection Service be delegated to regional authorities, but Vladimir Putin, who was prime minister at the time, never acted on Kozak's proposal.

Onishchenko has worked at Putin's behest for years, despite technically answering to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev while head of the consumer protection agency. After Onishchenko's dismissal last week, it was announced that he will continue to be officially subordinate to Medvedev, working as one of his personal aides.

The head of the Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance Service, Sergei Dankvert, refused to predict what would happen to Onishchenko's former agency.

"I have never said that we would incorporate the Federal Consumer Protection Service," Dankvert told reporters at a news conference Friday. "I have always said that for consumers, it does not matter how many agencies control products, just as long as they work effectively."

Dankvert did not hide, however, his dissatisfaction with the way his rival agency functions.

"It is not that the Federal Consumer Protection Service is bad in itself. The problem is that it only checks products once they have reached the public," he said.

In a statement published on the consumer protection service's website, Onishchenko apologized to "colleagues and friends" for any "affliction or offense" he may have caused during his tenure as the guardian of Russia's groceries.

"In my defense, I ask you to trust that [my actions] were in the name of, or for the sake of, our work, our joint labor to which we have dedicated our lives," he wrote.

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