

The role of Bucharest's municipal administration in achieving food safety (1870-1914)

Abstract

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Our paper aims to investigate the role played by the capital's City Hall in promoting food safety. As this is ongoing research, the current text does not address all aspects of the topic but focuses on two of them: the specialized infrastructure developed by the municipality and the contribution of science in general and the Municipality's Laboratory for Chemical and Bacteriological Analysis in particular in building food safety for the people of Bucharest. These two themes were selected because they allow us to demonstrate the importance and complexity of the subject, and the status of the research is sufficiently advanced to enable us to draw preliminary conclusions.

The infrastructure built by the Bucharest municipality was an crucial factor in creating a safe food chain that did not compromise the health of city residents. The municipal abattoir, built around 1870 on the model of the one in Paris and completely rebuilt around 1910 to incorporate new sanitary and veterinary principles, was the main tool in the fight against numerous diseases, some of them very dangerous, transmitted from animals to humans through meat. Studying the abattoir enabled us to highlight the differences between the ideas of the Hygiene Council and the realities of the Bucharest meat trade, as well as the role that the sanitary authorities played as agents of modernization. Doctors and veterinarians were the main advocates of the new sanitary rules. They had the ability to support their ideas in the long term, sometimes over successive generations: as early as the 1870s, they advocated the slaughtering all animals only in abattoir, so they could be subjected to effective veterinary control. For four decades, the Hygiene Council pressured the city council until this goal was achieved in 1910-1911. The abattoir was a good starting point for studying resistance to modernization and the opposition that some professional groups (such as butchers) showed to sanitary regulations.

In the City Hall's vision, the market halls were nodal points of the food trade, simultaneously fulfilling two essential functions: they provided protection the food (but also the traders and customers) from hazards like dust and dirt, sun, cold or rain, and at the same time they facilitated the sanitary control of food by the capital's medical staff. The chapter on

the market halls analyses the constraints influencing the action of the Sanitary Service. During the 1870s and 1880s, one of the main challenges was the very limited number of specialists available to conduct sanitary food inspections, which included only a few doctors and one or two veterinarians. To address this issue, the solution was to centralise all trade in the Central Market Halls, where oversight could be more effectively managed. In the 1890-1900s, this constraint was rapidly attenuated in parallel with the increase in the number of specialized staff in the City Hall. At the same time, the population of Bucharest doubled, and with it the surface area of the city, so that the outlying neighbourhoods became too far away and their inhabitants could no longer come to the Central Market Halls. In response to these changes the Health Service developed a structure of the food trade in which the Central Market Halls were supplemented by neighbourhood market halls in densely populated areas, as well as smaller markets and grocery stores in the sparsely populated suburbs. In the decades prior to the First World War a number of such neighbourhoods market halls were built.

The chapter focused on the ice factory examines how new scientific discoveries and technological advancements have impacted a traditional industry that dates back to at least the 18th century. Research conducted in the West has shown that natural ice could be a carrier of deadly or even epidemic diseases, and bacteriological analyses carried out by the municipal laboratory have revealed the presence of a large number of bacteria in the ice used daily in Bucharest's food trade. We investigated the efforts of the authorities to limit this danger: they tested the waters in and around the capital and imposed rules on ice harvesting from those lakes, established methods of controlling the ice trade. We have determined that the Health Service was aware of the limitations of their efforts, which were hindered by insufficient cooperation from ice traders. Consequently, after 1890, the Health Service increasingly advocated for the use of artificial ice, produced from water that was tested daily by the municipal laboratory. At the beginning of the 20th century, the municipality built an ice factory, then cold storage rooms at the abattoir and in the basements of some of the market halls, thus creating the first elements of the modern cold chain. These significant investments resulted in safer food trade and the introduction of a new technological sector in Romania. By making traders accustomed to these facilities, they also contributed to the creation of a market that developed rapidly in the interwar period.

The second part of the thesis focused on the role played by science, and in particular chemical and bacteriological analyses, in efforts to improve food safety in Bucharest. We analysed how the municipality gradually began to adopt these tools and the problems encountered in collaborating with external experts, which led to the establishment of its own laboratory in the last decade of the 19th century.

The study of a short-lived experiment, the Chemical Laboratory for Milk Control in Bucharest (1905-1908), has shed light on the hesitations of the authorities and how this experience influenced administrative practices. As a result, in 1908, the Communal Laboratory was reorganised and enlarged, including the integration of the former Laboratory for Milk Control.

The municipal laboratory has enabled the authorities to carry out a much broader control activity, to accurately identify dangerous, improper or adulterated food. Additionally, the laboratory has played a significant role in other areas: daily monitoring of drinking water and preventing and combating epidemics. The laboratory's work provided a much more realistic picture of the problems and dangers threatening Bucharest residents through food. Over time, the continuous efforts of the laboratory staff have contributed to the introduction of new sanitary and hygienic standards, to changing the behaviour of food trade actors, and to improve food safety in the capital.

Bucharest built a food safety system that was far more advanced than anything else in Romania. Numerous solutions and types of activities specific to this field were introduced for the first time in the capital and taken as a model by the most important cities in the provinces. In the years leading up to World War I, ensuring food safety for the residents of Bucharest had become one of the most important activities carried out by the municipality, whether we consider it from the perspective of efforts (institutional, personnel, financial) or from the standpoint of consequences.