

26 MAY 2006

MESSAGE COMMISSIONER KYPRIANOU TO CZECH CONSUMERS
INFORMATION CAMPAIGN TRVEJETE NA SVYCH PRAVA
(TO BE PUBLISHED ON CAMPAIGN WEB SITE AND EUROPA)

As the Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, bringing Europe closer to its citizens is of particular importance to me. European consumer protection policy aims to give real and tangible benefits and rights to EU citizens.

The EU does not only open the door for business to EU-wide markets. It also promotes and protects the interests of its citizens in their daily life. But to make the European market place work for them, consumers need to know their rights, know how to use them and make informed choices. And, with the help of consumer associations, know how to make sure their rights are respected and how to obtain redress.

This is where this information campaign '**Trvejte na svých právech!**' comes into play. It aims to:

- inform Czech citizens of consumer rights EU consumer protection legislation gives them,
- encourage them to claim those rights, and
- promote consumer associations as a key source for information and advice.

The tv messages that will be on Czech public and commercial channels aim to alert consumers to the rights EU and national legislation gives them when taking out a consumer credit, shopping on the internet and going on a package holiday. In such transactions, important amounts of money are often involved, and it is worth your while to invest some time and effort to prevent problems - or, if they have already occurred, to try and obtain compensation or redress.

Focus group research in Prague, Brno and Ostrava has showed that Czech consumers often lack motivation to learn about their consumer rights or to join a consumer association – until they find they have 'a big problem'. Those occur mostly when signing contracts without reading the small print, and in the provision of services such as travel, banking and insurance.

In a recent survey, many Czech consumers themselves admit they do not know their rights: more than half say they do not know their rights when they take a credit to buy a car or washing machine, or when they buy a package holiday; and almost two-thirds admitted not to know their rights when they buy on the internet or from a mail order catalogue.

Why does the EU want to inform consumers?

Today your national laws give Czech consumers the same or similar rights and protection as other EU citizens. That was part of the accession process.

But adopting common laws is only part of the job. We also need to make legislation work. That means: stimulating consumer-friendly business behaviour, promoting consumer associations, helping consumers claim their rights and triggering active attitudes by consumers - thus shifting from consumer protection to consumer empowerment.

Open markets, the internet and other innovations in retail and distribution bring new opportunities, new products, new services, but also new pitfalls. Marketing techniques and tricks are getting more sophisticated by the day. To make the right choices consumers need to be alert and informed.

Following the latest EU enlargement, there are practically 450 millions of consumers in Europe. Their weight in the economy cannot be neglected: in the EU, final consumption expenditure represents almost 60% of EU GDP.

Confident and empowered consumers are the motor for European competitiveness, as they seek out the best deals regardless of borders, rewarding the European Union's best and most innovative businesses.

Better informed consumers who claim their rights will also contribute to improving the implementation and enforcement of consumer protection rules.

And consumers who know their rights at home should also know that they can benefit from similar rights and protection wherever they go or buy across the EU.

Why does the EU want to promote national consumer associations?

Consumer associations are the most trusted source of information about consumer rights in all EU countries. In the Czech Republic small, the Eurobarometer survey found that people trust consumer associations most (51%), above lawyers (22%) or friends and family (10%), or the government (1%), to explain their consumer rights correctly.

A strong consumer association is the best way to make sure that consumers' interests have a strong voice in national and EU policy making, and in dialogue with business.

That is why the campaigns we conduct in the new Member States combine professional communication expertise and the experience of consumer associations, in the Czech Republic, SOS- Sdruzeni Obrany Spotřebitelu.

A strong consumer association can stimulate the public debate about respect for consumer rights and offer a platform for citizens' active engagement in the public sphere.

To conclude, to get the full benefits of EU consumer protection legislation, consumers will have to know their rights and stand up for them and, if they so wish, join consumer associations.

I hope this campaign will be an opportunity to discuss consumer rights with all those concerned: young professionals and families, in the cities and in the countryside; consumer organisations, businesspeople and national authorities.