

Brussels, 3 September 2009

Questions and Answers on the promotion of independent consumer product testing

(see also [IP/09/1269](#))

SECTION 1 – GENERAL PROJECT INFORMATION

How does consumer product testing work in Europe?

Major consumer associations in Europe regularly test a very wide range of popular consumer products (from washing detergents through digital cameras to refrigerators) to compare their quality, efficiency and safety within a product category. The associations then publish the results in their magazines and websites, so as to help consumers looking for a specific product category make an informed choice based on reliable data. Since the testing costs are covered by revenues from membership fees or subscriptions, the associations do not have to rely on any advertising or sponsorship, and thus are able to remain independent.

Most of the product tests require the use professional laboratories specialized in specific types of analysis. For example, washing machines and vacuum cleaners are tested in a laboratory in the south of France, digital cameras in Bayern, Germany, sun-tan lotions in Niedersachsen, Germany, and mobile phones in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. .

While the cost of such comparative testing consumer products is very high, major consumer associations in Western Europe have been able to achieve significant synergies and keep the individual costs down by using a common pool of product tests which is managed by an umbrella organisation, **International Consumer Research and Testing (ICRT)**.

ICRT is an association of 44 consumer organizations from 38 countries, mostly in Europe but also further afield, e.g. from Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. ICRT aims is to promote co-operation in consumer research and testing among its members, to develop better test methods for consumer goods and services, and to encourage the development of consumer testing facilities.

Each year around a hundred joint tests are carried out as part of the ICRT scheme, of which over 30 have participants from five or more national organizations. The results of these product tests are then published in the consumer magazines of the participating national associations.

What were the objectives of the EU-supported project?

The core objective of the three-year EU-supported project was to **allow consumers in more EU countries access to the kind of independent, comparative product testing** that has reliably served consumers in countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands or the UK. The broader aim was to help **empower consumers to make informed choices about what they decide to buy** and to benefit from the wide selection of goods available on the internal market.

The way to expand access to consumer testing was by sharing the expertise of the ICRT and of established consumer associations with young associations in new EU countries, and by **building the capacity of consumer associations in new EU countries in testing and publishing product test results** based on the model that has proven successful in Western Europe.

Since consumer magazines publishing product reviews and test results are an important source of income for consumer organisations and an important way for them to attract new members, the project also aimed to help **make the consumer organisations more independent financially and more representative**.

How long did the project take and how much did it cost?

EU co-funding for this purpose was requested jointly by ICRT and the European Consumers' Organisation (BEUC) in 2005. The project covered a three year period, running from September 2006 until September 2009. The total cost was over € 5 million, out of which the EU contributed over € 1.6 million.

What has the project achieved specifically?

Consumer associations in six new EU countries (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia) have fully benefited from the three-year project.

Thanks to the project, consumer organisations in the six countries were able to:

- **either start up new independent consumer magazines and websites, or to improve existing ones** (for example, by no longer relying on advertising or sponsorship while adding comparative product test results to their content);
- **employ full-time researchers and train them** to become experts at understanding comparative test procedures, conducting market research, evaluating test results, writing product reviews, as well as marketing magazine and website subscriptions.
- publish the results of 18 product tests over three years.

All this was achieved in close partnership with experts from organisations such as Euroconsumers (publisher of consumer magazines in Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Brazil), UFC Que Choisir in France, Stiftung Warentest in Germany, Consumentenbond in the Netherlands, and Which? in the United Kingdom.

Which products were actually tested?

The products tested included washing machines, digital cameras, mobile phones, vacuum cleaners, child restraints, washing detergents, sun-tan lotions, portable music players, and TV sets. New models within some of these product categories were retested each year. Products from national producers were added to the sample selection to increase the relevance of the results for national markets and to check for any quality differences. Beyond the scope of the project itself, ICRT also provided the new member states with test results of EuroNCAP car crash testing for publication.

Where can I see all the product test results?

Since national consumer organisations rely on revenues from selling product test results, full access to all up-to-date test results is a paid service available from their national magazines and websites. A full list of links to these magazines and websites can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/empowerment/cons_tests_en.htm

With ICRT permission, the European Commission is making available free samples of product test results for Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia for members of the press, on request only (see IP/XX/XXXX for contact details). The samples are for five product categories: mobile phones, personal music players, washing machines, vacuum cleaners and washing detergents.

Why was EU support needed?

Before the start of the project, most consumer organisations in the new EU countries did not have the resources and the know-how to take part in the common testing effort and market product test results. They generally relied on government funding, which was used mainly to provide basic advice and information to consumers but could not cover expensive product tests.

Without external start-up support, these consumer organisations would not have been able to participate in the ICRT research and testing scheme and set up independent yet economically viable magazines and websites providing test results to consumers.

Why did only six new countries take part?

In the initial stages, consumer associations and magazines from ten new EU countries were considered. But partners from Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia proved at an early stage not to have sufficient organisational capacity to take part in the project.

The partner from Lithuania withdrew from the project in November 2008 due to internal organisational difficulties. However, the Lithuanian organisation LNCF benefited from a mentoring partnership with Forbrugerradet (FR) from Denmark and started publishing the quarterly testing magazine "Kuris?" as a result of its partial participation in the project. Lithuanian test results were produced and published <http://vartotojai.eu/> and at <http://kuris.info/>

The project never included partners from Bulgaria and Malta, since no suitable organisation could be identified by BEUC or ICRT at a time when the project was designed in 2005. Since then, however, the consumer magazine "Potrebitel" was set up by the Bulgarian National Consumer Association in 2006. The magazine was able to start publishing ICRT results through a dedicated project. The "Potrebitel" magazine hopes to have 600 subscribers to the print version by the end of the year, and has also successfully launched web sales of test results, both of single tests and of annual on-line access.

What are the next steps?

The project was intended as start-up support. As a result of the project, the beneficiary consumer associations have been able to build the capacity to run and market comparative product tests. They should now be able to operate independently as members of the ICRT network and as a professional subscription-based service for consumers in their respective countries.

SECTION 2 – THE PROJECT PARTNERS

Which partnerships were set up?

The project was based on mentoring partnerships between young consumer organisations in the new countries and those with considerable experience in consumer product testing and test marketing. The composition of these partnerships evolved over time to reflect specific know-how needs and country-specific circumstances. Below is the list of partners:

- **Cyprus:** the Cyprus Consumers' Association (CCA) – with the Consumentenbond (CB) in **the Netherlands**, and also Which? in **the United Kingdom** (from 2008);
- **the Czech Republic:** Sdružení obrany spotřebitelů (SOS), and then "D-Test" – with the Consumers Association of **Ireland** (CAI) and also Stiftung Warentest in **Germany** (from 2008);
- **Hungary:** Országos Fogyasztóvédelmi Egyesület (OFE) – with Verbruikersunie Test Aankoop/Test Achats (TA) in **Belgium**;
- **Poland:** Federacja Konsumentów (FK) and then "Świat Konsumenta" – with Stiftung Warentest (SW) in **Germany**, and also with Consumentenbond in **the Netherlands**;
- **Romania:** Asociatia pentru Protectia Consumatorilor din Romania (APC), now running the INFOCONS magazine in partnership with the National Association for Consumer Protection (ANPCPPS) – with Stiftung Warentest (SW) in **Germany** and with additional support from UFC in **France**
- **Slovenia:** Zveza potrošnikov Slovenije (ZPS) – with Which? in the **United Kingdom**, then with Stiftung Warentest (SW) in **Germany**.

What were the outcomes in specific countries?

Full final results of the project will be available after the final report is delivered and approved by the EU later this year. Below is a summary of preliminary country results

a) Cyprus

In 2008 the Cyprus Consumers Association (CCA) re-launched the bi-monthly "O Katanalotis" in a completely revamped format, with extended articles presenting test results. The magazine has over a thousand subscribers to date. A marketing campaign was initiated in 2009 to win new subscribers. Their target is to have 1,100 subscribers by the end of December 2009 through direct mail and other promotion and marketing actions, and to increase to 3,000 subscribers by the end of December 2010.

The "O Katanalotis" magazine costs € 10 per single issue on the newsstand, and an annual subscription costs € 25. The magazine's webpage is under construction and to be launched in the autumn of 2009. It will include pay-per-view options for single test results and magazine articles.

The CCA has also found funding for translation and publication into English and Turkish language of the test results. Given the absence of an independent testing magazine on the Greek market, possibilities of extending marketing of test results to Greece are being considered, notably thanks to further website development and web sales via <http://www.cyprusconsumers.org.cy/>.

b) The Czech Republic (and Slovakia)

In the Czech Republic, the SOS consumer association did not wish to publish a test magazine themselves but instead transferred this task to the "D-Test" magazine.

D-Test has significantly increased its subscriptions, from 6,728 in 2005 to more than 10,000 to date for a combined web/print magazine subscription and its newsstand sales from about 3,500 to 5,700 at 30 CZK (or €1,21) with a total circulation of 21.000. D-Test publishes 12 issues annually. An annual subscription (magazine + online access) is 588 CZK (or € 22.60).

Single issues sell at news stands for 65 CZK (or € 2,05). The D-Test website is <http://www.dtest.cz>.

In May 2009, D-Test succeeded in launching its presence in Slovakia where they are currently expanding. D-Test will need at least 5000 subscribers in Slovakia and some support from the Slovak government to launch a full Slovak version of the magazine/website. They have set up the <http://www.dtest.sk> mirror site (in Czech) for the benefit of Slovak consumers. According to surveys, Slovak visitors are for the moment willing to read the product reviews in Czech. Monthly visits to the website have increased from less than 1000 per month in 2005 to 102,642 visitors from Czech Republic (84 %) and 15,734 (13 %) from Slovakia in July 2009.

D-Test has become an affiliate member of BEUC, and has recruited a staff member to develop its marketing strategies. They are currently developing new services such as product selectors, making use of the expertise and experience of its partners.

c) Hungary

OFE, the Hungarian consumer association, has improved the quality and content of its "Kosár" magazine, one of the longest standing magazines in the new EU countries.

The magazine sells for 289 FT (or € 1.15) at newsstands and an annual subscription for 12 magazines and on-line access is about € 13, or € 20 including OFE membership and services. The number of subscribers is fairly steady at around 1,200 and single issue sales between 1,000 and 1,500. Visitors to the "Kosár" website <http://www.kosarmagazin.hu> have grown from 4,000 to 10,000 per month.

However, OFE admits difficulties in winning members and subscribers for the magazine in the current economic context, and still remains largely dependent on government financing, also for "Kosár".

d) Poland

The participating Polish consumer organisation, Federacja Konsumentów (FK), did not wish to publish a test magazine themselves but instead transferred the task to the "Świat Konsumenta" magazine.

Thanks to the additional support provided by ICRT in marketing and business-plan development, "Swiat Konsumenta" was able to stop publishing its commercial, profit-oriented magazine in September 2008 and converted into an independent non-profit magazine which is now free of advertising. It became a fully independent foundation, Pro-Test, qualifying for ICRT membership in 2009.

"Świat Konsumenta" is currently a web-based publication available at <http://www.swiatkonsumenta.pl>. The number of unique visitors is currently around 20,000 per month, and is expected to increase to 75,000 per month over the next six months as a result of marketing efforts. Annual subscription giving access to all new issues costs PLN 79 (or ca. € 19), a semi-annual subscription costs PLN 44 (ca. € 11), and single access to a specific test result costs ca. PLN 10 (ca. € 2.40).

A special print edition is planned for September 2009, featuring all the test results conducted during the final year the project. The special edition will be on sale at newsstands, in bookshops and on the website.

"Swiat Konsumenta" continues its cooperation with Federacja Konsumentów. The next step is the change of the title into "PRO-TEST Swiat Konsumenta". Feasibility studies and test sites have showed high interest and good potential for the sales of test results on the large Polish market.

e) Romania

The Romanian Association for Consumer Protection (APC) did not have a magazine at the start of the project and initially published test results in a national daily newspaper, but has since 2007 successfully launched web publication and web sales of test results at <http://www.apc-romania.ro/>

ACP has also found another national partner, ANPCPPS, for the print publication of the test results in the magazine "Infocons", from January 2009. "Infocons" has become an ICRT member. To date, five magazine issues with test results have been published. The main focus is on building a strong membership and they aim for at least 10,000 subscribers in first year and 60,000 in three to five years time.

f) Slovenia

The Slovene Consumers' Association (ZPS), founded in 1991, is the main consumer organisation in Slovenia with 18 years of experience. Thanks to the project, the association was able to significantly upgrade their "VIP" consumer magazine, notably improving their capacity to perform local tests, for instance on food products.

VIP is a monthly magazine, with ten issues per year, with double issues in summer and at Christmas. The newsstand price for a single issue is €3.60. Magazine content is also available online at <http://www.zps.si>.

As of 2008 general test information is available free of charge, but on-line access to premium content, such as detailed results of comparative tests and similar material, is against payment. In 2007 an e-newsletter service with latest news, description of articles in the last magazines and some fresh advices was launched to attract potential new members.

VIP also features additional information for its members, e.g. about consumer rights, or legislative developments.

The number of subscribers/members has grown from around 4,000 in 2005 to about 6,600 to date. The print circulation is 8,500. Unique visits to the website have increased from 15.000 in 2005 to 55.000 in 2007 and 30,000 in the first six months of 2009. Web-only subscriptions are planned for next year, as well as pay-per-view online access to single test results.

ZPS membership fee is € 40 per year and includes telephone counselling, legal advice in case of disputes, subscription to the "VIP" magazine (the print version) and full access to website content.

In 2009, ZPS introduced a TEST logo which manufacturers can display on tested products. The logo refers to the test results as published in "VIP" and gives the product ranking in the tests.