

EUROPEAN CONSUMER SUMMIT
MONDAY 11 APRIL 2011, 09:15 HRS
Management Centre, Rue de l'Aqueduc 118, 1050 Brussels

"EU CONSUMER POLICY: THE WAY AHEAD"

Ladies and Gentlemen Good Morning,

I am very pleased to be here today for the opening of the third European Consumer Summit.

And I very much look forward to the results of this two-day discussion to enrich the future strategy for European consumer policy.

At a time when Europe needs new sources of growth, consumer policy is one of the key areas that can make a telling contribution towards meeting the Europe 2020 objective of a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy.

Consumer expenditure accounts for 56% of EU GDP – so incremental improvements in consumer decision-making exert significant leverage bolstering EU efforts to strengthen the Single Market and stimulate growth.

This is why, more than ever, we need well-protected, empowered and confident consumers and we need – as President Barroso put it – to "ensure that the benefits of the internal market get through to the final consumer".

This is the objective that should guide us when we prepare, before the end of this year, the next – post 2013 – EU Consumer Policy Strategy and its supporting financial framework.

We have just finalised an evaluation of the current Consumer Policy Strategy and financial framework. Its findings tell us what has worked so far and what should be improved to truly put consumers at the heart of the Single Market.

Your contribution in the workshops today and tomorrow will form an integral part of the process leading to the formulation of the post 2013 Strategy.

Of course we cannot address in this limited time all aspects of consumer policy in depth. We have therefore selected the areas where your input would be of particular relevance and value.

Let me highlight the main issues at stake and how your work today and tomorrow can contribute to elaborate the way forward.

The evaluation has shown that, under the current Strategy, we have been increasingly successful in the integration of consumer interest into EU policies. This encourages me to pursue this effort and to address a number of remaining and emerging challenges.

Just to list a few –

- consumer choice in increasingly complex and recently liberalised markets;
- the opportunities and threats brought by digitalisation;
- moving towards more sustainable patterns of consumption; and
- the issue of social inclusion.

From this year onwards, upon request of the European Parliament, we will publish an annual report on how the Commission has integrated consumer interests into EU policies. This also responds to the call of the Lisbon Treaty that requires that consumer protection requirements shall be taken into account in defining and implementing the Union policies and activities.

And I will, of course, continue working very closely with Vice President Reding on strengthening consumer rights legislation.

It goes without saying, and the evaluation has confirmed it, that our work in monitoring the Single Market to highlight where it doesn't work for consumers, to diagnose sectoral problems and to understand behaviour is key for consumer policy.

The Consumer Market Scoreboard and in-depth market studies, and also our work on empowerment that we are publishing today are the basis for effective integration and the design of smart legislation – and is the subject of our 1st workshop on data gathering.

Let me now turn to what will be a key priority of the future Strategy and Programme – enforcement.

Ensuring that products are safe is the bottom line of consumer policy. The forthcoming revision of the General Product Safety Directive would ideally lead to a unification of market surveillance for harmonised and non-harmonised products.

The evaluation has shown that, under the current Strategy, co-ordination has increased between authorities in charge of product safety.

We need to:

- build on this trend and further strengthen surveillance and enforcement through RAPEX;
- further develop the co-ordination of joint surveillance actions with Member States; and
- pursue the development of international co-operation to deal with the globalisation of production chains.

With regards to consumer rights, the evaluation concludes that cross-border enforcement co-operation has been strengthened through the network of enforcement authorities (the CPC Network) and co-ordinated actions such as the "sweeps".

Here again, our objective is to amplify this trend through reinforced co-ordination of the CPC network operations, by fostering exchanges of expertise and best practice through joint actions.

Enforcement of legal requirements – be it in the field of safety or consumer rights – is the responsibility of national governments.

However, national resources to ensure that rules are followed are limited. Innovative participatory enforcement techniques can complement State enforcement with actions taken by private economic operators and consumers, to the benefit of all citizens.

The 2nd workshop will look at participative enforcement from the consumer policy perspective.

The Strategy and Programmes have provided increasing support to consumers who seek help and advice on cross-border problems through the network of the European Consumer Centres. We plan to launch initiatives to further increase their visibility and awareness among consumers.

Further strengthening the efficiency of the Centres envisages, for example, developing co-operation with the enforcement bodies, and including their involvement in the development of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR).

Most of the ECC Directors are present today, and I invite you to visit the ECCs stands in the lobby.

Indeed, giving consumers effective means of resolving disputes will make them more confident to look for goods and services in a broader market, both off-line on-line, and cross-border, and thus benefit from a wider choice and better prices..

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is a non-judicial way for consumers to obtain redress at low cost and without excessive delay.

For businesses, ADR can be a tool for maintaining reputation and preserving customer trust. While ADR mechanisms have made progress in Europe, there is clear evidence that ADR has not yet reached its full potential.

I will present a legislative proposal by the end of this year with three objectives:

- First, to provide consumers with an ADR for any commercial dispute;
- Second, to ensure that ADR bodies provide a high quality service; and
- Third, to make ADR schemes as efficient as possible for disputes linked to cross-border e-commerce transactions.

This issue will be explored in the context of the 3rd workshop on ADR.

In addition, as you no doubt know, a public consultation on collective redress was launched in February – this runs until the end of April.

As a follow-up, the Commission will adopt, by the end of this year, a Communication aimed at presenting the general principles relating to collective redress and future policy lines.

The evaluation of the current Strategy and Programme also showed the value of the support provided to EU level and national consumer organisations.

- We need an effective consumer participation in all relevant policy groups to ensure that the representation of consumer interests in policy making.
- We need consumer organisations with the adequate level of expertise and means to act on consumers' behalf and to speak with a "loud, competent and informed consumer voice".
- We also need to work closely together with national authorities to address the heterogeneity of the situation of national consumer organisations.

The 4th workshop on capacity building in the consumer movement will reflect on how to achieve this objective given the available resources.

Consumer information is crucial to good decision-making. But in an age of information overload and in the light of the insights from behavioural economics, we need to re-think our approach.

Simply giving consumers more information is not the right approach. The information must be relevant, clear and easy to understand.

Our survey on consumer empowerment exposes the lack of consumers' awareness of their rights and the problems they encounter to perform simple numerical calculation or understanding logos.

But I must warn you – later this morning DG SANCO will organise a small test on a few relevant questions for you as well!

And this essential issue of information will be addressed in the 5th workshop on consumer information.

Information is of no use if consumers are not sufficiently equipped to properly understand and make use of it. This is why information should be combined with education.

This is the objective of both the European Diary aimed at teenagers and the on-line tool Dolceta. We have launched an evaluation of these tools, the results of which will be available by the summer.

We need to ensure that educational tools are suited to users' needs both in terms of content and presentation, and that they have an effective impact on their skills as consumers.

Of course, we would like consumer education to be – in one way or another – part of the national school curricula, but as you well know, this is a national competence, so we are considering how best to work with Member States to achieve this objective.

I am sure that the 6th workshop on consumer education will provide us with very useful food for thought in this respect.

Finally, let me conclude by stressing that we work in many different partnerships in our efforts to empower European citizens as consumers. This also includes the media, whose capacity to reach and empower citizens directly is invaluable.

In today's media seminar, we will explore the potential for partnership to make a difference for consumers in the marketplace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have just highlighted a range of issues to be considered in the context of the future Consumer Policy and Programme where I believe that the consumer should feature as the SIRE of the Single Market.

This concept is particularly meaningful to me as it represents the way I see consumers: consumers are key players in the economy.

They must therefore be fully empowered to act in the Single Market and to benefit from it through to a consumer policy that puts at its heart: their Safety, their Information (and Education), Redress and the Enforcement of their rights.

I have no doubt that the discussions today and tomorrow will, thanks to the diversity of your perspectives, expertise and commitment, provide us with extremely valuable input and help us to design a policy that will benefit EU consumers and, as a result, boost economic growth.

Thank you very much.

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