



EU ENLARGEMENT

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HEALTH AND CONSUMER PROTECTION IN EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

The European Union gives the highest importance to health and consumer protection, and it insists that any new Member State should meet the standards it has established.

Protection ranges widely, covering product safety, economic interests, and public health. The standards also take different forms - regulations, directives, decisions, recommendations, coordination initiatives... But they all have a real impact on the quality of life of European citizens, and the EU enlargement process is geared to making sure that any new Member State is able to provide the same degree of protection.

PROTECTING EUROPE'S CONSUMERS

Is this product safe? Is that "reduced" price-ticket honest? Is that advertising claim true? And how can I get compensated if a product or service is defective? These questions underlie so many daily decisions taken by consumers and they are all the more difficult to answer in the EU single market, where products and services are sold across national borders.

This is why the EU legislation is in place - to make sure that products are what they say they are on the label, and that advertising is not misleading. To ensure that a "free" credit offer does not contain hidden costs. Or that an "ocean-view hotel room" really has a view of the ocean. Or that the terms of a mobile phone package cannot be changed without the prior consent of the consumer. Or that the switch to a different energy provider is always quick and cost-free, and the information on bills is clear and transparent. The EU has set up rapid alert systems about products that pose a risk, as well as cross-border cooperation mechanisms to enforce fair trade and to control distance selling.

Hence only lighters that are child-proof can be placed on the market. Unfair terms in consumer contracts

are prohibited. Timeshare holiday homes and package travel deals are closely regulated to ensure consumers get a fair deal. The legislation currently in place in the EU takes care of the interests of consumers, and makes sure that products are safe. Moreover, an extensive consumer protection programme is renewed every few years, updated to take new consumer needs into account. The Consumer Programme aims at further enhancing market surveillance and providing consumers with tools to defend their rights, to enforce seamless consumer protection across the European Union. It provides support to organisations that defend the interests of consumers and serves to promote consumer information and education, to make European consumers aware and empowered, especially the most vulnerable ones. Scientific committees have also been set up to monitor and advise on consumer safety and public health. To make sure this all works effectively across the EU, cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws is needed.

KEEPING EUROPE HEALTHY

Health regulation is largely a national concern, but even so, Member States have given the EU specific responsibilities for public health - on subjects stretching from tobacco control and communicable diseases to nutrition and prevention of injury.

Patients receiving a blood transfusion or a donated organ need to be reassured that what they are getting comes from a safe source and has been carefully handled. EU-agreed limits apply to the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco products and to the advertising and sponsoring of them. The EU has also adopted recommendations on the prevention of smoking, on initiatives to improve tobacco control, and on smoke-free environments.

EU legislation covers patients' rights in cross-border healthcare and the safety and quality of blood, tissues, cells and organs intended for transfusion or transplantation. Rules are in force for the functioning of a network of national authorities responsible for rare diseases, for promoting eHealth, for the notification of serious adverse reactions and events with advanced medicines and for surveillance and control of serious cross-border health threats, including communicable diseases. Multi-annual programmes support joint actions in the field of health, in areas as diverse as the prudent use of antimicrobials, improvements in the use of seasonal influenza vaccination, and combating HIV/AIDS, cancer screenings and mental health and well-being. Other programmes focus on drug abuse prevention, or aim to remedy health inequalities. There are even rules to limit exposure of the general public to electromagnetic fields.

MAKING IT WORK ACROSS EUROPE

To check on how far countries that want to join the EU are already meeting these standards, extensive consultations take place on a regular basis. All the countries in the enlargement process have been given clear outlines of the EU requirements, and the candidate countries that are negotiating their accession are taken item-by-item through what they must do to implement EU rules in their national legislation, and, just as importantly, to enforce them, with sufficiently skilled and qualified staff and the right infrastructure.

Proper consumer protection needs effective market surveillance, and an alert public, aware of its rights and ready to defend them. This is why the EU promotes public consultation in the enlargement countries, the development of consumer and patient organisations, and the active involvement of those in policy implementation. In this way, the enlargement process prepares for a wider EU, where provisions for consumer protection and health are fully aligned with EU standards, and where half a billion European citizens can be confident their rights are being respected, and guaranteed by law.



Rada Marković, President of the National Consumer Protection Programme Commission in Montenegro

"I expect that proper implementation of consumer legislation will protect consumer rights", said Rada Marković. "I also believe that informing consumers and raising awareness of the importance of consumer protection, which have been implemented in cooperation with the NGO sector, will enable consumers in Montenegro to bring economically rational decisions".