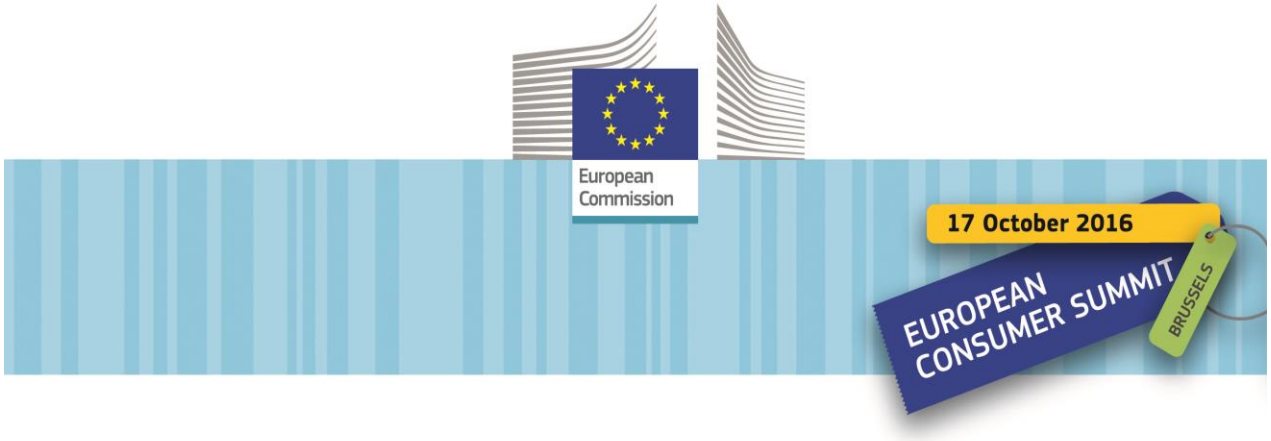

Martin Siecker, President, Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

Speaking points at the European Consumer Summit (EN)

17 October 2016, Brussels

Justice
and Consumers

Speaking Notes for INT President Martin Siecker

European Commission Consumer Summit 2016

17 October 2016

Charlemagne building, Brussels

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

Consumers are the largest economic group in the economy. No other group feels the effect of practically every public and private economic decision as strongly as consumers do. All of us here today are, by definition, consumers. And our legislators have a special duty to listen to consumer needs and to protect our interests.

I am here today representing the Union's consultative body on economic and social affairs, the EESC. Wer represent the voice of civil society in Europe and we have always listened very closely to consumers' concerns. Beyond this, our members, all grassroot national representatives, have worked together to advise the Commission, the Parliament and the Council on various consumer issues. These issues have ranged from misleading marketing practices, to consumer vulnerability in business practices and more recently Digital Contract Rights. This is one way of making sure that consumers' issues reach the institutions whose decisions have an impact on their rights and daily lives.

Every year since 1999 the EESC has organised its flagship annual event known as the European Consumer Day conference. And, dove-tailing nicely with today's theme, this year's conference took a long hard look at Better Regulation. Bringing together experts in the field of consumer law, we debated:

- Why it should be a Commission priority to regulate better
- What Better Regulation means for consumers in practice
- And whether the benefits outweigh the burden

The EESC is becoming an increasingly active contributor to better regulation across the entire lifetime of European legislation, including the evaluation and revision stage. More concretely, we have been asked by Commissioner Jourova to contribute towards the Commission's evaluation of Consumer and Marketing Law and the evaluation of the Consumer Rights Directive.

This exercise not only means the European Commission is pressing its ears close to the ground and acts as a very willing listener to consumers, it also implies the European Economic and Social Committee has a key role to play. Why? Because through our networks and expertise we offer unparalleled access to the people on the ground. This matters now more than ever.

In a world, not just a Union, facing unprecedented levels of discontent with the political set-up, it has become amply clear that the issues – and not politics – matter to our citizens. And by going to the very heart of the matter, the EESC is on the front line, working with citizens to improve the laws and rules governing our economies and societies. Our close and regular conversation with civil society networks ensures we have a correct fundamental reading of the issues affecting Europe's citizens. And more importantly how they feel these issues should be addressed. How do we do this? Through organised civil society.

For example, we are currently working on an EU Consumer Law Information Report, which draws on both previous experience and works, as well as direct contributions from citizens. To this end:

- We have organised consultations with civil society organisations in 9 Member States where the Commission identified a lack of information.
- We have sent focused questionnaires to our networks and
- We have listened to social partners, regulators and academic experts in the field invited to speak at a Hearing.

Despite the broad public discontent with the performance of what is generally known as "Brussels" we found that the EU laws have been broadly well-received and offer good consumer protection. Which can *not* be said for the Member State responsabilities of implementation and enforcement. In fact, this negligeance was one of the most consistent problems that was flagged up throughout the entire exercise. As the general public blames

"Brussels" this omission by the Member States Governments undermines confidence in the EU and feeds in to the rising euroscepticism.

We found that legislation needs to be updated to take into account online platforms and the sharing economy. And that information requirements should be simplified. Less is indeed more in this case.

We also found that local campaigns (often funded by the EU) are better known than EU campaigns.

And finally, we found that the definition of "the average consumer" needs to be re-thought. Can we honestly say today that there is a clear-cut distinction between who is a producer and who is a consumer?

Ladies and gentlemen, long-recognised consumer rights such as:

- the right to safety,
- the right to be informed,
- the right to choose, and
- the right to be heard

are all noble principles. It is our job to see that they are a reality for ALL European consumers. As the largest economic group in the European economy, we deserve nothing less.