New strategy for consumer policy

2011/2149(INI) - 15/11/2011 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the new strategy for consumer policy.

The text adopted in plenary was tabled by the GUE/NGL Group as an alternative motion for a resolution intending to replace the motion for resolution tabled by the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection.

Parliament welcomes the Commission's initiative to launch a Consumer Agenda, and emphasises the need for the Commission to propose a **proactive policy** for defining smart regulation, with the objective of achieving a **coherent legal framework**. It emphasises the need for the **proper implementation and enforcement of existing legislation** (in particular the latest consumer rights directive) accompanied by dissemination of appropriate information concerning the rights and obligations of each party.

The Commission is invited to:

- ensure **better coordination between its policies** which affect consumers;
- strengthen **international cooperation and the exchange of information** with non-EU countries in the field of consumer protection;
- guarantee special protection for **groups of consumers who are particularly vulnerable** because of their mental, physical or psychological infirmity, age or credulity, or made vulnerable by their social and financial situation;
- improve the criteria and arrangements for carrying out more impact assessments, and to review, where appropriate, EU legislation which has an impact on consumer policy and establish best practices by means of which Member States can implement existing legislation correctly.

The resolution calls for an in-depth review among policy-makers of ways of designing smarter policies which provide consumers with information they need and can actually use, without creating additional burdens for companies.

(1) Consumer empowerment: the resolution emphasises the need to empower consumers by providing them with **useful, targeted and understandable information**. It insists that the EU and national authorities, and consumer organisations and companies, need to step up their efforts to improve consumer education. Members stress the need to educate consumers, from as **early an age as possible**, so that they understand and make use of the information appearing on products.

Given that the significant increase in **e-commerce**, which is now very important to consumers, with 40% of EU citizens purchasing online, Parliament points out that **consumers' and retailers' confidence needs to be increased**, particularly as regards cross-border online purchasing and trading, by guaranteeing their respective rights and obligations on the internet. The resolution stresses the need to inform consumers about their rights and obligations and ensure that consumers' rights are fully respected when it comes to internet use and protection of intellectual property rights, at the same time protecting personal data and privacy.

The Commission is invited to:

- provide **adequate support and capacity building to consumer organisations** in each Member State, with a view to strengthening their role and resources, thereby enhancing consumer empowerment make European logos for which the recognition rate still appears unsatisfactory (in

particular the CE conformity marking logo, the European Ecolabel, the Möbius strip for recycling or risk marking) more identifiable and more intuitive
- to **launch information campaigns** in all the Member States concerning the European 'CE' designation and the significance thereof, making it clear to consumers what it does (or does not) represent and providing them with more comprehensive information, while seeking to raise awareness of product safety in professional circles;
- to look into the remaining obstacles to **bank switching** by consumers and to consider ways of eliminating them, such as setting up an EU-wide bank account number portability system.

The resolution emphasises the need to provide consumers and traders with **more transparent and comparable information**, for example through the use of unit price indications and accurate and transparent internet price-comparison websites, as well as meaningful and effective product labelling. It emphasises the importance of labelling and, in this context, calls on the Commission to take account of consumers' growing calls concerning, for example, fair trade, carbon footprints, the scope for and types of recycling and origin marking. Parliament notes that some 30 million EU citizens do not have access to **basic banking services** and calls on the Commission to put forward a proposal, as it announced it would do in the Single Market Act and in its 2011 work programme.

(2) Consumer protection and product safety: Parliament stresses the urgent need to increase the general level of safety of consumer products in the EU, especially in the framework of the forthcoming revision of the General Product Safety Directive. It calls for better product safety guarantees, particularly in e-commerce on the internal market. The resolution stresses, further, the need to increase the **safety standards for toys**, and urges Member States quickly to transpose and fully implement the new Toy Safety Directive. It also stresses the importance of access to **financial education** and financial advice, and calls for better regulation of financial advisory services.

The Commission is invited to:

- look more closely into the issues of the impact of chemicals on consumers' health, antibiotic resistance and nanotechnologies, on the basis of existing EU legislation in those fields;
- develop a common assessment and labelling system;
- continue its work on the sale of goods and unfair contract terms, a review of the rules on unfair commercial practices (UCP), the Consumer Credit Directive, the Misleading Advertising Directive.

The resolution calls for the **RAPEX** notification system to be strengthened and made more effective and transparent for consumers, in order to improve overall awareness of the risks posed by specific consumer products and enable companies and customs authorities to take swift and appropriate action.

It also **proposes expanding European support for research in emerging sectors**, such as green and ethical consumption, and for the pooling of everyday consumer goods (cars, bicycles, household appliances, etc.).

(3) Towards a more social and sustainable consumer policy in Europe: in this respect, the report calls on the Commission to:

- include a **consumer accessibility** element in the Consumer Agenda in order to make sure that vulnerable groups (elderly and disabled in particular) have access to the essential products and services they need;
- take the **gender perspective** into account in the Consumer Agenda;
- ensure that the Consumer Agenda rules out all discrimination on grounds of sex in connection with access to and the supply of goods and services;

- address the issue of how private consumption can become more **sustainable** in order to promote innovation, economic growth and a low-carbon economy, in keeping with the objective set in the Europe 2020 strategy;
- coordinate their efforts to inform consumers better about more efficient ways to buy and consume food, in order to prevent and combat food waste.

(4) Enforcement of consumer rights and redress: the Commission is called upon to use all its powers under the Treaties to improve the transposition, application and enforcement of all consumer-related EU legislation. Parliament calls upon the Member States to step up their efforts to fully and correctly implement this legislation.

The resolution calls for accessible and effective redress mechanisms for European consumers, as these are essential if barriers in the internal market, particularly as regards e-commerce, are to be eliminated. It also calls on the Commission to come forward with one or more proposals through the ordinary legislative procedure, thereby ensuring the proper involvement of Parliament. The Commission is called upon to **draw on best practices from Member States**, such as the Nordic ombudsman model, and to consider giving ECC-Net legal authority in the area of consumer dispute resolution.

Lastly, Parliament stresses the need for the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework for the post-2013 period to include **adequate funding** for measures to achieve the goals set out in this resolution.