

Consumers' protection: sale of consumer goods and associated guarantees

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An agreement on new minimum statutory after-sale guarantees for shoppers anywhere in the European Union was clinched without debate by Parliament and Council delegations to a joint Conciliation Committee. The accord is intended to strengthen the single European market by removing shoppers' fears about what to do if the goods they buy in another Member State turn out to be faulty. The directive agreed, which Member States must transpose into national law by 1 January 2002, will create a common set of minimum rules entitling consumers to redress (free repairs, replacement, a price reduction or cancellation of the contract) in the event of defective purchases. At Parliament's insistence, free repairs or replacement include postage, labour and materials. Parliament also ensured that compensation for the incorrect installation of goods (eg wardrobes) will also apply to self-installation by a consumer misled by faulty instructions. In fact, talks between Parliament and Council leading up to meeting revealed a large area of common ground so that the bulk of the 14 amendments adopted by Parliament at second reading on 17 December 1998 have been incorporated, subject to some rewording, in the final text agreed. As a result, producers of consumer goods are to be recommended to attach to their products a list giving at least one contact address in every Member State where the product is marketed. The idea is that cross-border shoppers can contact this address if they have problems. The text also allows Member States to create mediation bodies to handle consumer complaints, whether national or cross-border. In addition, at Parliament's request, the directive emphasizes the need to achieve a high level of consumer protection.