The promotion and protection of consumers' interests in the new Member States

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Henrik Dam KRISTENSEN (PES, DK) on the promotion and protection of consumers' interests in the new Member States. It began by pointing out that consumer protection was a "relatively new concern" in the ten new EU countries, and concluded that the creation of a ‘consumer culture’ based on a higher level of consumer awareness was essential for better enforcement and application of the existing legal framework. The report stressed that the internal market would not function properly as long as consumers were less well protected in some Member States than they were in others, and called on the Commission to draw up a specific strategy to encourage the development of a consumer culture in the new Member States. While welcoming the good record of those countries in terms of transposing existing Community legislation into their legal systems, MEPs called on their governments "to identify means by which consumer legislation may be effectively applied and enforced in practice". They also called for market surveillance structures to be strengthened in order to ensure high safety standards and the rapid removal of any defective or dangerous products.

The report noted that the new Member States' consumer protection authorities also had a key role to play in creating a 'consumer culture' and urged those countries to develop and strengthen their administrative systems in this field. The committee also stressed the role of consumer organisations in ensuring proper, independent representation of consumers in the EU, but pointed out that in the new Member States non-governmental, non-profit-making organisations often did not have the necessary own capital, that fundraising was not adequately developed, and that consumers themselves were unwilling to contribute to such organisations out of their own pockets "on account of the enduring belief that the state alone is responsible for protecting consumers". MEPs also observed that Commission requirements for obtaining project grants were "strict and difficult to meet"for such under-funded organisations, and called on the Commission to examine whether such criteria could be made more flexible. Parliament and the Council, as the budgetary authorities, were encouraged to devote more money to enhancing consumer protection in the new Member States.

The Commission was also urged to support awareness-raising campaigns and training programmes for consumer organisations and their staff. One such campaign should be aimed at preparing consumers for the adoption of the Euro in the new Member States, building on both the positive and negative experiences of the adoption of the Euro among the old Member States. MEPs also underlined the need for cooperation between organisations in the new and the old Member States - be it through twinning projects, mentoring projects or other knowledge-sharing programmes.

Lastly, the report recommended that the new Member States widen the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms by developing state-supported mechanisms and encouraging the establishment of private complaint boards in specific sectors.