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Programme of Community action in the field of health and consumer protection 2007-2013: BEUC position paper

This is the BEUC position paper on the European Commission Proposals for a new Community Policy and Health Strategy to run from 2007 to 2013¹.

The proposal is in the form of a draft decision with three annexes and explanatory material. Briefly, the Commission proposes to join health and consumer policy together in one programme with some aims or objectives common to both policy areas and others that are specific either to health or consumer policy.

SUMMARY of MAIN POINTS of BEUC'S SUBMISSION

Consumer priorities must be maintained

The proposed joining of health and consumer policy should not diminish the importance and specificity of consumer policy. The programme should focus on the consumer as an important economic player and driver of competition, and on the role of consumer policy in improving the functioning of the Internal Market. There are some factors in common between consumer and health policy but consumer policy is also closely linked to many other policy areas, including competition, trade, internal market, economic policy, transport, agriculture, energy, etc. (Of course there may also be health aspects to some or all of these policies but in a different way.)

Maximum harmonisation must not be used as a one-size-fits-all principle

The objective of ensuring a common high level of protection for all EU consumers needs to be maintained. However, we are concerned about an apparent presumption in favour of maximum harmonisation in the review of the consumer acquis. The issue of maximum harmonisation should be subject to a broad and open debate and evaluated on a case

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Healthier, safer, more confident citizens: a health and consumer protection strategy and Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a programme of Community action in the field of health and consumer protection 2007-2013 (COM(2005)115)

by case basis. Member states must continue to have the possibility to anticipate or respond to new challenges in the market place.

Concrete measures to achieve the integration of consumer policy into all EU policies

Integrating consumer policy into all EU policies has always been one of our demands. For this to happen in practice, there is a need for concrete measures at EU level, which should include benchmarking and monitoring instruments to measure the achievement of this objective.

Need for consumer-oriented research at EU level

Consumer oriented research is essential to ensure that the perspective of the demand side of markets is taken into account. A reporting mechanism on consumption and consumer protection at EU level should also be established to provide objective and reliable information. The information and expertise of consumer organisations must be used to better understand consumers and markets. We are concerned that the Consumer Institute would mean such expertise would be given less attention.

Better enforcement and redress mechanisms

More emphasis should be put on enforcement at national and cross-border level by establishing a general framework for cooperation between EU member states. Effective redress mechanisms for national and cross-border transactions must be put in place by improving access to alternative dispute resolution systems and assessing the quality of existing schemes.

Financial support to develop capacity-building of consumer organisations

We welcome the programme's aim to increase the participation of consumer organisations in EU policy-making. Such support should also be provided at national level for consumer organizations in the new member states which lack financial resources. Capacity-building of consumer organisations is also key if consumers are to have more awareness of their rights, especially in the new member states.

Consumers need a **nutrition policy** that addresses the way in which foods are marketed, the use of health and nutrition claims, the high levels of salt, sugar and fat in many products and the nutritional information provided to consumers.