

Consumer policy at the heart of Europe's future

Today 67 years ago, on 9 May 1950, Robert Schuman presented his famous declaration which laid the foundations for the creation of the European Union (EU). Around the same time, the first consumer organisations emerged across the EU. A new dynamic market economy was developing, with a lot of opportunities for both businesses and consumers. When faced with this abundant amount of new possibilities and choices, consumers were in need for independent advice. When they wanted to buy a fridge, or were looking for a washing machine, and later on also insurances or mortgages.

As Europe got bigger and more integrated, consumers' choice for the best product or service and their necessary protection against unfair practices took an increasingly European dimension as well. Defending consumer rights couldn't be handled anymore at a mere national level. When products and services cross the border, consumer protection should do too. It started with the adoption of the European consumer programme in 1975. From then on, decade by decade, a robust framework of EU consumer policy has been built that greatly benefits EU citizens and affects our everyday life in a way most of us aren't aware of.

Did you know strict EU rules make sure food providers, from the farmer to the supermarket, respect hygiene and safety requirements? Thanks to an EU-wide alert system unsafe food is withdrawn from the market. And labelling obligations allow consumers to know what is in their food exactly and to opt for the healthiest option where they wish to do so.

Did you know EU regulations ensure that toys, hair dryers and baby clothes for sale in all European shops meet high safety standards, regardless where they were produced? An alert system between EU countries monitors that unsafe products are swiftly recalled from the market.

Did you know that when a flight is cancelled or delayed, or when travellers are denied boarding, thanks to EU regulation consumers are entitled to assistance and financial compensation?

If consumers today are better protected when buying online, can rely on high health and environmental standards, benefit from high privacy standards, and are finally free of roaming charges, that is because tough EU laws made this possible. They might not always get the acknowledgement for it, but let it be clear: Europe positively influenced consumers' daily lives in so many ways, setting standards that serve as inspiration for many consumers around the world.

But the future might be less bright and the challenges ahead of us are not to be underestimated. Political crises, Brexit, and a growing distance between European citizens and their leaders have struck the European Union. That is why this year's commemoration of Robert Schuman's declaration and the remembrance in March of the 60th anniversary of the Rome treaties are no unequivocal moments of celebration. We hear calls from all over Europe, urging the EU to be closer to the people. And they are 100 % right!

We need to get everyone back on board again, at different speeds if this is more appropriate. Working together is the only way we can make things better for everyone, for consumers. But how can we restore this trust? To start, with a strong and pioneering consumer policy. We are all consumers. Each and every one of us. Enforcing and protecting consumers allows the EU to reach out directly to its citizens and impact them in their daily lives. Let's show the people what Europe is doing and can still do for them. Give them the tools to enforce their rights when something goes

wrong by introducing an EU collective redress system. Say no to no-show clauses in airline contracts. Fight for longer guarantee rights and durable consumer goods ... This calls for courageous decisions and courageous decision makers. Six decades ago Robert Schuman had the courage to stand up and make a difference. Today all consumer organisations from all over Europe, gathered as a network within The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), call on the European leaders to do the same. Be courageous again and put consumers at the heart of Europe's future.