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New EU plans to beef up consumers' online privacy

The European Commission is presenting plans today to overhaul a law covering the confidentiality and security of electronic communications such as phone, e-mails or messaging services. According to these plans, services such as Skype or WhatsApp, also called over-the-top services (OTT), should respect similar rules to those for traditional phone and text messaging services. The Regulation will also set out when users' consent is required for tracking online activities and for using customers' communication and location data for purposes such as marketing. It should also protect consumers against unsolicited commercial communications.

BEUC calls on EU legislators to adopt rules obliging providers to apply strong privacy settings by default and to impose strict limits on tracking. According to a recent European survey¹, 92% of surveyed Europeans say it is important that personal information, such as their pictures and contact lists on their smart devices, are only accessed with their permission and that the confidentiality of their e-mails and online messages is guaranteed. A large majority (82%) also say it is important that tools for monitoring their activities online (such as cookies) are only used with their permission.

The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) is asking that all businesses who offer digital communication services to consumers fall under the new rules. They should comply with the same obligation to protect the confidentiality of communications and consumers' privacy.

Monique Goyens, Director-General of The European Consumer Organisation, commented:

"Online communication services such as Skype and WhatsApp are replacing SMS and regular phone calls at lightning speed. Consumers' privacy should not be less protected when using these services. They should be able to rest assured that their phone calls, e-mails or messages are for their eyes and ears only, irrespective of the service they use.

"This reform is the opportunity to confront the widespread problem of online tracking. Consumers must have an alternative to being under 24/7 commercial surveillance when using digital services.

"When 89% of respondents to a recent EU survey say they want their browser to protect their communication by default, then the EU should heed their call. Smart devices and apps should not track consumers' behaviour by default."

ENDS

¹ Eurobarometer survey on ePrivacy: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eurobarometer-eprivacy>

