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Date: 19/02/2020
Reference: BEUC-PR-2020-005

Europe's digital future must benefit consumers

In response to the European Commission's artificial intelligence (AI) initiative and data strategy – both presented today – The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) calls for the EU to put in place safeguards to mitigate risks from AI and data sharing for the EU's 450 million consumers and to protect their rights in this digital revolution.

BEUC recognises that AI-powered products and services, such as virtual assistants, can make consumers' lives more convenient. But there are risks too, for instance when AI leads to manipulation or discrimination against some consumers. BEUC calls for legally binding EU rules to establish AI rights for consumers, obligations on companies to be transparent and accountable about their use of AI, and powers for public authorities to ensure AI applications do not expose consumers to harm.

Monique Goyens, Director General of The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), said:

"Europe needs binding and enforceable rules to make sure AI applications bring real benefits to consumers and society. Consumers should be enabled to understand how artificial intelligence is used and what its consequences are. They need to be able to trust companies to use AI safely and responsibly and that they are protected if things go wrong. Without these safeguards, consumers will not take up these new services and products."

Currently, a lot of data is concentrated in the hands of a few dominant companies. This often comes at the expense of consumers' privacy rights and can also prevent competitors from bringing new products and services to the market. Consumers stand to benefit if the EU tries to make data access for companies easier. But this must not lead to a race to the bottom and consumers must remain in control of what happens with their personal data.

Monique Goyens commented:

"Too much data is currently concentrated in the hands of a few industry players who use it exclusively for their benefit. Consumers would be better off if, for instance, companies like car manufacturers would give access to vehicle data to allow innovative mobility services to thrive. It is good that the EU wants to legislate how data can be used better but when it comes to personal data, it must always be the consumer to decide whether their data is collected and how it is shared. The objective to help companies compete with big tech should not happen at the cost of consumers' privacy and autonomy."

ENDS

Notes:

On the use of AI and algorithmic decision-making (ADM), BEUC calls for:

- legally binding and enforceable rules on fairness, transparency, accountability, control and safety to ensure AI/ADM is used in a fair and responsible way.



- Consumers must have a clear picture of how decisions are made and be able to oppose them. Companies must put in place appropriate measures to guarantee compliance and allow adequate regulatory oversight.
- existing legislation on consumer protection, discrimination, product safety and product liability must be updated to protect consumers against risks arising from AI/ADM and to offer redress and enforcement mechanisms if they suffer harm.
- systems to assess risks from AI/ADM to ensure that the higher the potential adverse impacts of their use, the stronger the regulatory requirements.

EU-rules on accessing and sharing data must:

- Require companies to provide access to data only if necessary to correct market failures, for instance if companies refuse to grant competitors access to data in order to prevent them offering innovative products or services.
- guarantee data collection and use comply with the General Data Protection Regulation. Special protections need to be put in place when companies access each other's data.
- create tools for consumers to better control their personal information.
- ensure data security, so as to prevent data leaks.

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