

Contact: Johanne Kleis: press@beuc.eu
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BEUC reports major airlines for breaching passenger rights and calls for industry investigation

Following thousands of complaints from upset airline passengers, BEUC – and 11 of its member organisations¹ – have reported some major airlines to national consumer protection authorities and the European Commission for breaching passenger rights and for using unfair commercial practices. BEUC and its members are also asking for a broad investigation of the sector regarding wide-spread unfair practices during the last few months.

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, some of Europe’s biggest airlines have routinely failed to reimburse passengers and to provide clear and complete information to passengers about their rights. Whilst there have been unfair practices across the industry, Aegean, Air France, EasyJet, KLM, Norwegian, Ryanair, TAP Portugal, Transavia are amongst the highest-ranking airlines in terms of the number of consumer complaints made to our members during the crisis. Though we acknowledge that the pandemic has led to big challenges for the travel industry, providing wrong information and misleading consumers about their rights is not acceptable.

In response, BEUC and its members are calling on national authorities to investigate these practices and to force airlines to comply with EU passenger and consumer rights legislation. The top three most-complained about practices according to our members are: 1) forcing consumers to accept vouchers instead of monetary refunds for cancelled flights; 2) failing to provide information to consumers on their rights to a refund; 3) providing misleading information to consumers on their rights.

These practices are a breach of the EU Air Passenger Rights Regulation. It says that airlines must inform consumers about their rights for cancelled flights and give passengers the choice of a monetary refund, in case of cancellation due to extraordinary circumstances like a pandemic. Hiding, or providing partial or incorrect information to consumers about their rights to reimbursement, is also against EU consumer law on unfair practices.²

BEUC Director General Monique Goyens said: “Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, many airlines have been flouting passenger rights. They have been denying passengers their right to a refund for cancelled flights and misleading passengers by providing them incorrect, partial or unclear information about their rights. Our members have been inundated with thousands of complaints.

“Strong enforcement measures by national authorities against airlines are overdue, to ensure that passenger rights are respected also in times of crisis. The sheer volume of consumer complaints about airlines throughout Europe since the start of the pandemic clearly demonstrates the widespread character of the infringements. That is why we want to see a thorough, industry-wide investigation into these practices. The recurrent problems faced by travellers also highlights the urgent need for improvement of the enforcement of air passenger rights and changes to airlines’ business models”.

ENDS

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¹ The members are: Altroconsumo (Italy), Adiconsum (Italy), DECO (Portugal), EKPIZO (Greece), Forbrukerrådet (Norway), KEPKA (Greece), OCU (Spain), Spoločnosť ochrany spotrebiteľov (S.O.S.) Poprad (Slovakia), Test-Achats/Test-Aankoop (Belgium), UFC Que Choisir (France), Which? (UK)

² Examples of unfair commercial practices faced by consumers: 1) Impossible to request a refund because it is almost impossible to contact customer service; 2) Impossible to request a refund because the standard online form referred to broken links; 3) Difficulty to find information about monetary refunds, while vouchers are systematically promoted to consumers; 4) Failure to inform consumers of their right to choose re-routing at a later date. This choice and the re-routing options must be offered by the airlines, which did not do so, forcing passengers to rebook themselves.

