Towards a more sustainable single market for business and consumers

Achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, in line with the European Green Deal, will require the EU to overhaul its production and consumption patterns. During the November II plenary session, the European Parliament is expected to vote on an own-initiative report that recommends a possible way forward by making products more durable and easier to repair and recycle, and by providing consumers with more rights and information, so as to nudge them towards more sustainable choices.

Background

The average citizen's consumption is beyond planetary boundaries for several environmental impacts, as measured by the Joint Research Centre. The environmental footprint is largest for food, housing (especially energy used for heating) and mobility. Part of the problem is that too many resources are used for products that become obsolete prematurely: in Germany, the proportion of large household appliances replaced within the first five years of their service due to a defect increased from 3.5 % in 2004 to 8.5 % in 2012. At the same time, EU law requires sellers to repair products only during the two-year legal guarantee period, while consumers often consider repairs too costly or impractical and, in some cases, due to technological advances and fashion, undesirable. A 2018 study showed that 41 % of consumers did not repair their vacuum cleaner when it broke down, and 37 % did not repair a mobile phone. According to the European Environment Agency, smart phones are on average replaced after less than two years. Meanwhile, a special Eurobarometer survey (2019) showed that consumers are aware of the problem; two thirds of them agreed that their consumption habits have negative effects on the environment.

European Commission's plans

As announced in the European Green Deal, the EU aims to become climate neutral by 2050, with a proposed interim target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 55 % by 2030 compared with 1990 levels. In March 2020, the new circular economy action plan announced a sustainable product policy framework that will aim to make products less harmful to the environment and empower consumers to make more eco-friendly choices. The plan includes legislation on sustainable products, consumers in the green transition, design requirements and new consumer rights for electronics, substantiating green claims, sector-specific mandatory green public procurement criteria, and a review of the Industrial Emissions Directive.

European Parliament position

On 26 October 2020, Parliament's Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) adopted a report 'Towards a more sustainable single market for business and consumers'. The report suggests that any sustainable single market strategy should benefit both EU businesses and consumers. It calls on the Commission to consider a number of measures, such as improving information for consumers on the durability and reparability of products; assessing how to bring the legal guarantee more into line with the estimated lifetime of a product; promoting repair by establishing a consumer's 'right to repair'; promoting green public procurement criteria as a default choice; and developing a digital 'product passport' in close cooperation with industry and stakeholders. Parliament is expected to vote on the report during the November II plenary session.

Own-initiative report: 2020/2021 (INI); Committee responsible: IMCO; Rapporteur: David Cormand (Greens/EFA, France).

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