

Protection of consumer rights in the field of economic services of general economic interest

Over the years, the demand for services of general interest and the manner they are provided have evolved significantly. Services that the state would traditionally provide in a direct form have been increasingly outsourced by national, regional and local authorities, and are now often provided by the private sector (with or without profit). This changed approach is driven by the processes of deregulation, the changes in government policies and the changing needs and expectations of users

According to its European definition, a general interest service is a service that "public authorities classify as being general interest, and is subject to specific public service obligations". These services were identified as having a central role in the European model of society that the European Union has been built on, because they meet people's basic needs.

In the terms and procedures they are governed by EU rules, there are two categories of services of general interest, namely services of general economic interest and non-economic services.

We have to specify, and forewarn about the significant fact that the theme of the Journal's 34 issue is based only on services of general economic interest (SGEI)

The services of general economic interest are those economic activities that generate results for the benefit of the general public, which the market would not provide (or would provide otherwise in respect of quality, safety, affordability, equal treatment and universal access) without public intervention. Public service liability is required from the provider by assigning a task, based on a general interest criterion designed to ensure that the service in question is provided on terms which enable it to fulfill its mission. **SGEI are essential to consumers**, because their absence results not only in discomfort and inconvenience, but also in a threat to health, life and social integration. Consequently, there are a number of specific Community rules such as public procurement, environmental and consumer protection, which apply to certain aspects of these services.

The European strategy for services of general economic interest has two main medium-term objectives, viz. to ensure **a high level of consumer protection**, notably by improving access to information, better consultation and better representation of consumers' interests, and to ensure **enforcement of the rules of consumer protection**, notably through law enforcement cooperation, information, education and redress.

When general economic interest services were provided by state owned or controlled monopolies, consumers had fewer things to worry about. There was

only one supplier, one quality and one price. Decisions were made by someone else. Even consumers had to pay for low quality services, they could do little or nothing to improve the situation. Now, when a sector of these services has been liberalized, consumers should behave differently. They should investigate the market, get information regarding various providers, prices, accessibility, geographical and economic restrictions, the terms of the contracts, after-sales services, thus becoming able to compare similar services and take their own decisions and choices, which turn out to be more profitable for them. This is a new difficulty. Changing attitudes takes time, education and training.

At the same time, providers of such services should promote, in their activity, **common principles** such as universality and equality of access, continuity, security and adaptability, quality, efficiency and affordability of tariffs, transparency, stability, duration and equal sharing of risk, protection of underprivileged social groups, protection of users, consumers and the environment, and citizen involvement, considering the specific circumstances of each sector.

The services of general economic interest refer to basic services having to do with supplying **power and energy, electronic communications** (Internet, audiovisual program retransmission services, fixed and mobile phone), **postal services, transport, water supply and drainage, and waste removal.**

Consumers, as natural persons, is the final destination of the process, and has a number of rights regarding services in this area; hence, observing these rights must be prioritized in providing services. Consequently, we devised this type of theme in order that we might receive answers in this direction, because, as is known, there are many problems, challenges and complaints about these services to the consumer.

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