



ECC-Net
The European Consumer Centres Network
2008 ANNUAL REPORT





More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://europa.eu>).

Cataloguing data can be found at the end of this publication.

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Abbreviations

ECC	European Consumer Centre
ECC-Net	European Consumer Centres Network
ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
NEB	National Enforcement Body for Air Passenger Rights



1. FOREWORD



European consumers are the engine of a successful economy. Confident consumers can drive recovery and growth and make a real difference to boosting Europe's competitiveness.

Empowering consumers is a cornerstone of the EU Consumer Strategy. The European Commission is committed to ensuring that consumers have solid rights, real choices and full market transparency.

This requires more than just EU legislation protecting consumers. The key for European citizens is to be able to benefit, in their daily lives, from the rights that legislation entitles them to. What really matters for citizens is that consumer protection law works in practice and is observed by all.

The European Consumer Centres have an increasingly important role to play to ensure that consumers can exercise the rights that are granted to them by legislation. The centres are in contact with consumers on a daily basis. They inform and assist consumers in finding a solution when something goes wrong during a cross-border transaction.

In 2008, the European Consumer Centres handled over 62 000 contacts with consumers who turned to them for advice about their rights or for help with problems in the course of cross-border shopping. This was a substantial 22 % increase over the previous year.

The work of the centres shows that, in 2008, European consumers' biggest problems were with air travel, recreational services and hotels and restaurants. The number of complaints in these sectors has grown significantly over the last year, pointing to the need for closer surveillance and for action to enforce consumer rights in these areas.

E-commerce is another area that needs further attention. In 2008, as in the past, almost half the problems reported to the centres had to do with online shopping. Cross-border online shopping is still not working well for consumers. If Europe is to reap the benefits of an internal market online, it needs properly enforced legislation and confident consumers. The two go hand in hand. This calls for stronger enforcement of legislation – which in turn can help boost consumer confidence – combined with more awareness-raising.

To conclude, in 2008 the European Consumer Centres consolidated their role as a unique direct channel of communication with consumers. The centres have contributed to boosting consumer confidence in the European single market, which is essential to sustain demand and growth in Europe, in particular in the current economic downturn. I believe the European Consumer Centres Network has the potential to play a greater role in promoting consumer rights and in advising policy-makers on what works best for consumers.

Thank you, European Consumer Centres.

Meglana Kuneva
European Commissioner for Consumers



2 • EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of the main activities and results of the European Consumer Centres Network (ECC-Net) in 2008 and highlights some of the key problems facing cross-border shoppers that the centres have identified. All the statistics, statements and conclusions in this report are based on the information collected from the cases handled by the network.

More and more consumers are turning to the European Consumer Centres for help.

In 2008 the centres handled over 62 000 contacts with consumers. This was an increase of more than 22 % over 2007. The European Consumer Centres provide information on consumer rights and support consumers seeking redress when something goes wrong (see Chapter 3).

Problems with products and services are at the top of the list of consumer complaints.

In 2008 problems with products and services purchased in another Member State came top of the list, generating 25 % of all complaints from consumers. Besides products and services, most complaints were about problems with delivery (18 %), terms of contract (16 %) and unfair commercial practices (14 %). In 2007 the main reasons for complaints were problems with terms of contract (25 % in 2007).

Transport remains the number one problem sector for consumers.

Three main sectors (transport, recreational services and hotels) account for over 70 % of all complaints. In 2008 **transport services** generated over 33 % of all complaints, a 10 % increase compared with 2007. **Recreational and cultural services** generated over 25 %, an increase of 12 % compared with 2007. **Restaurant, hotel and accommodation services** made up over 13 %, an increase of 5 % from the previous year.

Almost half of all complaints concern online transactions.

Online shopping is the most convenient way for consumers to reap the full benefits of the internal market by comparing prices, products and services. However, consumers still seem to be having many problems when using the Internet to buy online. Both in 2007 and in 2008 almost half of all consumer complaints handled by the network concerned products or services purchased online (47 % in 2008).

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Czech consumer — German trader — value added tax

A Czech consumer bought a new motorbike in Germany. Although he made it clear that he was going to export the bike to the Czech Republic, the price incorrectly included value added tax, which should be paid in the country where the vehicle is registered. As a result of the dealer's mistake, the consumer had to pay value added tax twice: once in Germany, and again in the Czech Republic. The consumer had no success when trying to solve the situation with the seller and with the tax office in Germany responsible for handling cases involving foreign taxpayers. At the instigation of the Czech ECC, the German European Consumer Centre intervened and the dealer refunded the unduly charged value added tax to the consumer.



ECCs stepped up their work on out-of-court dispute resolution by 40%.

When it proves impossible to find an amicable solution with a trader who has flouted consumer rights, ECCs help consumers to use out-of-court dispute-settlement procedures. Their work on guiding consumers through such schemes increased by 40 % compared with 2007.

ECCs focused on air passenger rights and online shopping.

ECCs organise joint projects and events on key consumer rights issues. In 2008, the ECCs produced a review of complaints concerning air passenger rights and the European Online Marketplace report on e-commerce. They also created 'Howard', the online shopping assistant (already implemented on many ECC websites), and conducted an information campaign on tourism. ECC-Net organised a number of awareness-raising schemes, including the 'Best Consumer Campaign' competition and campaigns on consumers' rights in connection with the opening of energy markets and the UEFA Euro 2008 football championship. For further information, see: http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/redress_cons/index_en.htm.

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Danish consumer — Estonian trader — cancellation of flight

A Danish consumer purchased air tickets from an Estonian air carrier. Due to death in her close family, the consumer had to cancel the tickets and asked to be reimbursed. The trader agreed to reimburse, provided the consumer presented a death certificate. After sending this document to the air carrier, the consumer still did not receive any money back and turned to ECC Denmark for help, which in turn contacted ECC Estonia. Following a lengthy exchange of correspondence and several phone calls between ECC Estonia and the air carrier in question, the consumer received her money back.

3. THE ECC NETWORK

3.1 Background

The European Consumer Centres Network (ECC-Net) is an EU-wide network that provides consumers with information on their rights when shopping across borders and supports them with seeking redress when something goes wrong. With the addition of ECC Bulgaria and ECC Romania at the end of 2007, ECC-Net now consists of 29 European Consumer Centres, one in each of the 27 EU Member States plus one in Iceland and another in Norway.

ECC-Net is co-financed - by grants - by the EU and the countries participating. For the action taken in 2007-2008, the EU contributed over €8.5 million to support the ECCs. As stipulated in the Consumer Programme¹, the host organisations are public or non-profit-making bodies designated by the Member State or the competent authority concerned and approved by the European Commission².

3.2 Services provided by ECC-Net

The services which ECC-Net provides to consumers concentrate on business-to-consumer problems when citizens shop across borders, either in person or in the form of distance purchases (mainly e-commerce).

- ECC-Net advises consumers on their rights in cross-border shopping. It also provides information on both EU and national rules and on opportunities offered by the European single market.
- It gives advice and support to any individual with a problem related to a cross-border purchase. The ECC contacted by the consumer works together with the ECC of the country where the product or service was purchased.
- In most cases ECC-Net helps consumers reach an amicable solution with the trader.

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German consumer — Austrian trader — cold calling

ECC-Net stopped an Austrian trader pestering elderly people in Germany. The trader was making automatic telephone calls to thousands of German consumers inducing them to use expensive premium telephone numbers to obtain information about winnings they had allegedly made. This commercial practice is against the German Unfair Practices Act and triggered telephone bills running into hundreds of euros for victims who fell into the trap. This unlawful trader mainly targeted elderly people aged between 70 and 90. Due to their age, restricted mobility or inability to understand that they were being called by a voice machine, they felt intimidated by these repetitive daily telephone calls. Since court proceedings against the Austrian trader failed to put an end to this practice, ECC Austria persuaded the trader to stop calling German consumers. This concerned approximately 1 500 consumers."

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Irish consumer — French trader — car rental

An Irish consumer hired a car in France and returned it to the car-hire company at the end of the rental period, when the car was checked by all parties who confirmed there was no problem with it. Later on, an employee from another car-hire company crashed into the vehicle parked in the company car park. The consumer was not in the car at the time of the crash. A few days later, the consumer discovered that he had been charged €310 for the damage. After almost a year exchanging correspondence, the issue was still unresolved, so the consumer requested the assistance of ECC Ireland. Following the intervention of ECC Ireland and ECC France, the trader returned the full amount which had been charged to the consumer for the damage.

1 Decision No 1926/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 establishing a programme of Community action in the field of consumer policy (2007-2013).

2 See 'Host organisations' in point 3.4.



- ECCs provide advice on out-of-court settlement (alternative dispute resolution - ADR) procedures for consumers who have been unable to reach an agreement directly with the trader. ADR schemes usually call in a third party, such as an arbitrator, mediator or ombudsman, to help the consumer and the trader find a solution. In some instances, the only solution is to take the case to court.
- Members of EEC-Net cooperate in 'joint projects' to investigate specific sectors where consumers are experiencing particular difficulties. ECC-Net reports regularly on trends in complaints about air passenger rights and about e-commerce.
- The centres use a common IT tool to register and share consumer requests. This IT tool is also useful for compiling statistics.
- Consumers can ask ECCs for help either by visiting or calling the centre or by using an online complaint form available in all official EU languages on the ECCs' websites (for further details, see point 3.3).
- ECC-Net also cooperates with other EU-wide networks, such as SOLVIT which addresses problems arising from misapplication of European single market rules by national authorities, and FIN-NET, an out-of-court network for financial services.
- The ECCs are in a unique position to know the everyday concerns and problems of consumers. As such, ECC-Net is increasingly providing input to policy-making at national and EU levels.

CONCRETE "SUCCESS STORIES"

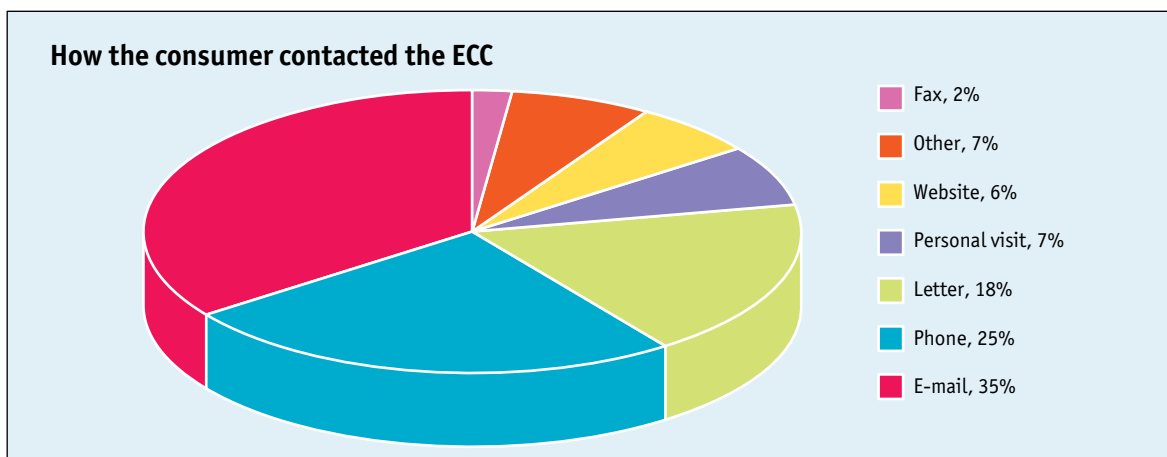
Portuguese consumer — Italian trader — disappeared luggage

A Portuguese consumer left four pieces of luggage in a room offered by an Italian hotel specifically for this purpose. When he returned to retrieve the luggage, one of his suitcases had disappeared. The consumer filed a formal claim for reimbursement. After several reminders and letters, he still received no reply from the hotel. ECC Italy repeatedly contacted the hotel without success and therefore launched a dispute settlement procedure via an ADR body in Milan. In the end the hotel reimbursed the full value of the missing suitcase.

3.3 Access to the ECCs

ECC-Net offers direct contact with consumers. In 2008, consumers contacted the centres by e-mail in about one third of all cases, but asked for assistance in person or by phone in another 32%. This confirms the ECCs' role of providing direct assistance. 18% of all consumers contacting the centres did so by letter.

Access to the ECCs



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Italian consumer — Dutch trader — hit by a car

An Italian consumer was hit by a car and injured during his cycling holiday in Amsterdam. His belongings (watch, digital camera and bicycle equipment) were badly damaged in the crash. An eyewitness helped the cyclist and the car driver gave her contact details and left the scene. After returning from holiday, the consumer contacted the driver. The driver's Dutch insurance company refused to pay for the damage suffered by the consumer, who therefore contacted the Italian ECC, which forwarded the case to ECC Netherlands. ECC Netherlands contacted the insurance company of the car driver and obtained compensation of € 1 500.

3.4 Host organisations of the European Consumer Centres

Country	Host organisation	Type of organisation ³
Austria	Verein für Konsumenteninformation, VKI (Association for Consumers Information)	NGO
Belgium	Organisation Indépendante pour la Protection du Consommateur a.s.b.l – OIPC, Test-Achats (Independent Organisation for Consumer Protection)	NGO
Bulgaria	Commission for Consumer Protection (CCP)	G
Cyprus	Commission for Consumer Protection, Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism	G
Czech Republic	Česká obchodní inspekce (Czech Trade Inspection) (CTI)	G
Denmark	Forbrugerstyrelsen (National Consumer Agency)	G
Estonia	Consumer Protection Board of Estonia	G
Finland	Kuluttajavirasto (Consumer Agency and Ombudsman)	G
France	Euro-Info-Consommateurs/Euro-Info-Verbraucher e.V.	NGO
Germany	Euro-Info-Consommateurs/Euro-Info-Verbraucher e.V.	NGO
Greece	Hellenic Ministry of Development, Consumer General-Secretariat	G
Hungary	Országos Fogyasztóvédelmi Egyesület (National Association for Consumer Protection)	NGO
Iceland	Neytendasamtökin (The Consumers' Association)	NGO
Ireland	European Consumer Centre Dublin Ltd	I
Italy	Adiconsum – Associazione Difesa Consumatori e Ambiente (Association for Consumer Protection and Environment)	NGO
Latvia	Consumer Rights Protection Centre	G
Lithuania	State Consumer Rights Protection Authority – SCRPA	G
Luxembourg	Groupement d'Intérêt Economique – GIE (European Consumer Centre)	I
Malta	Consumer and Competition Division (CCD) within the Ministry for Finance, the Economy and Investment (MFEI)	G
Netherlands	Stichting Het Juridisch Loket (Foundation the Legal Service Counter)	NGO
Norway	Consumer Council	G
Poland	Office of Competition and Consumer Protection	G
Portugal	Direcção-Geral do Consumidor (Directorate-General for Consumers)	G
Romania	Association for Consumer Protection – ACP	NGO
Slovenia	Zveza Potrošnikov Slovenije (Slovene Consumers' Association)	NGO
Spain	National Institute for Consumers – NIC	G
Slovakia	Ministry of Economic Affairs	G
Sweden	Konsumentverket, KOV (Consumer Agency, CA)	G
United Kingdom	Trading Standards Institute (TSI)	NGO

³ NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation. G: Governmental. I: Independent.

4 MAIN NETWORK EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

4.1 Joint projects

ECC-Net collects information and analyses trends on selected topics, based on the complaints that consumers make to the centres. Each year a core group of centres coordinate joint projects on key topics for consumers and report on their findings. In 2008 three joint projects were undertaken on the following subjects:

Tourism

The joint project on tourism, launched in 2007, continued throughout 2008. The purpose was to provide tourists across Europe with practical information and advice on a range of issues that affect cross-border tourists. This project produced nine leaflets in English which were translated into different languages and widely distributed to tourists. They covered 'arrival and stay', 'shopping and taxis', 'hotels', 'vacation rental', 'travelling by train', 'travelling by plane', 'travelling by car', 'travelling by boat' and 'health abroad'. The project steering group was made up of the ECCs from France, Germany, Spain and Cyprus.

The European Online Marketplace: Consumer complaints 2007

The purpose of this project was to highlight and analyse the main problems that consumers face when engaging in cross-border consumer transactions online. The report, published in May 2008 (fourth ECC-Net report on e-commerce), presents a summary of the results and trends observed. It identifies product delivery as the number one problem for consumers and concludes that, if cross-border online trade is to develop to its full potential, traders must meet their obligations and consumers need to be aware of their rights. The project steering group was made up of the ECCs from Ireland, Greece and the Netherlands.

Alternative dispute resolution (ADR)

The joint project on ADR was launched at the end of 2007. The aim was to provide statistical evidence of the use made of ADR schemes in cross-border cases, by identifying the top 10 product or service sectors in terms of specific consumer complaints that led to ADR. The final report (due in summer 2009) will analyse the outcome of ADR cases dealt with by the network and look at issues such as possible barriers to ADR of cross-border complaints. The report should also provide added value for future ADR schemes. The project steering group was made up of the ECCs from Denmark, the United Kingdom, Italy and Poland.

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Lithuanian consumer — Belgian trader — hotel services

A consumer from Lithuania booked a hotel in Belgium. Upon arrival she was asked for a deposit of €150 as a guarantee against any additional costs, such as use of the mini-bar, Internet services, etc. The consumer provided her credit card as a deposit. After she checked out, she realised that the hotel had withdrawn the deposit from her credit card, even though she had not used any extra services. The consumer wrote to the hotel asking for an explanation but received no reply. She then telephoned the hotel, which promised to clear up the situation and call her back but never did. The consumer turned to ECC Lithuania for assistance. Following the intervention of ECC Lithuania and ECC Belgium, the consumer recovered her deposit.



4.2 Alternative dispute resolution workshops and seminars

To improve awareness about out-of-court resolution schemes amongst consumers and businesses, ECC-Net organises seminars and workshops at national level plus conferences to exchange best practice at EU level. In 2008, in addition to several seminars at national level, the following main EU-wide ADR events were organised by the ECCs:

Baltic Sea Conference on ADR in Riga

ECC Latvia hosted the fourth ADR seminar of Baltic countries under the title 'Best Practice Exchange on ADR Systems Development in the Baltic Sea Countries' in Riga on 3 November. This event provided an opportunity to exchange experience on how to develop and strengthen cooperation between Member States and facilitate use of ADR by local and foreign consumers. A report on the seminar was published.

Conference on ADR in Slovenia

ECC Slovenia organised an international conference on 'Alternative Consumer Dispute Resolution: proposed ADR Mechanism in Slovenia and Experience of ECC-Net' on 23 May. The event was attended by over 50 participants from 13 EU Member States and Norway. The first part of the conference focused on a proposed ADR system in Slovenia. ECC Austria presented criteria for a successful ADR. The second part consisted of a discussion forum where ECC Directors from Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg and Belgium exchanged experience with the participants.

4.3 Other main events

ECC-Net Cooperation Day

In 2008 ECC-Net held its Cooperation Day on 4 December in Paris. ECC Directors and case-handlers participated in the event hosted by ECC France. This provided an

opportunity to discuss issues of joint interest such as drafting standard letters in response to consumer queries and requests, meeting the statistical needs of the network, encoding air passenger rights cases and harmonising the encoding of cases.

Best European Consumer Campaign

On 10 March Commissioner Kuneva hosted an award ceremony in Brussels to announce the winner of the 'Best European Consumer Campaign' for 2007. In preparation for this event,



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Bulgarian consumer — Spanish trader — online reservation

Five consumers booked tickets from Sofia to Barcelona from a Spanish online reservation site. One week later the Sofia-Barcelona-Sofia route was no longer available. The consumers claimed reimbursement of the money they had paid, a total of €438.30. Seven months later, they still had not been reimbursed. After the ECCs' assistance, they were fully reimbursed.



ECCs organised consumer campaign competitions at national level and selected the national participants for the final at European level. Representatives from ECCs and all the national finalists were present at the award ceremony. The first prize went to the Finnish Consumer Agency for ‘Galactor and the code-breakers’. The UK campaign won the ‘most original’ prize with its ‘Consumer challenge quiz’. Ireland won the award for the ‘best financial campaign’ and the prize for ‘best children’s campaign’ went to Hungary. Special merit prizes were awarded to Norway for its ‘iTunes’ campaign and to Estonia for ‘Make responsible credit decisions’.

European Consumer Day events

On 14 March the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) organised its tenth European Consumer Day with a special focus on cross-border consumer redress. To mark the occasion, Commissioner Kuneva gave a speech on key consumer policy issues such as the urgent need to have a complete picture of the real difficulties that are creating low levels of trust in cross-border redress.

On 15 March a series of events and ‘open days’ around the theme ‘European Consumer Day’ were organised in the Member States by the ECCs in cooperation with the Commission Representations. Activities included conferences, exhibitions, celebrity information events, consumer debates, online quizzes, presentations in schools and ‘mobile info-centres’, all aiming to get across the message that consumers should ‘know their rights and use them’.

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Swedish consumer — Dutch trader — burns

A Swedish consumer suffered physical injuries when filling a lighter with gas from a refill bottle manufactured by a Dutch company. While the consumer was filling the lighter, the gas started pouring out. So she put the refill bottle in the kitchen sink. After a few seconds the bottle ignited and exploded. The consumer suffered burns to her face, hands and hair and the kitchen was severely damaged. The consumer requested the ECC to intervene since the trader refused to accept any liability. Following the intervention of the Dutch ECC, the consumer obtained compensation of €5 000 from the trader.

CONCRETE “SUCCESS STORIES”

Maltese consumer — Romanian trader — delayed luggage

A consumer from Malta flew with a Romanian airline. Five pieces of his luggage arrived two days later and one of the suitcases was badly damaged. The consumer claimed a refund of his expenses. The consumer attempted to resolve the complaint himself, but was unsuccessful. Thanks to the efforts of ECC Romania, the consumer received compensation.



Air passenger rights workshop

On 30 October ECC Sweden hosted a workshop on air passenger rights in cooperation with the European Commission’s Representation in Sweden. The purpose was to exchange experience and ideas concerning case-handling, ADR, cooperation with NEBs and contacts with air carriers. Thirteen ECCs and five NEBs were represented at the workshop, plus one ADR scheme, one air carrier and the European Commission.

E-commerce seminar

On 8 and 9 May ECC Cyprus hosted a seminar on ‘E-Commerce – Shopping Online’ in Nicosia and Limassol under the auspices of the Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism. The aim was to inform consumers about their rights and about potential risks when shopping online. The main speakers at the seminar were the Director of ECC Denmark and the Chief Inspector of the Financial Crime Investigation Unit. Over 250 people attended the seminar, including representatives of other ECCs. The event was extensively covered by the media.

UEFA campaign

In connection with the ‘Euro 2008’ UEFA European football championship, which took place in Austria and Switzerland from 7 to 29 June, the European Commission launched a consumer advice campaign. The campaign addressed problems which football fans might encounter on their travels abroad — such as air passenger rights, medical insurance cover, ticketing, roaming charges and shopping. Helplines were set up and brochures were published by the Europe Direct service. All ECCs were involved in providing support and advice to consumers — both before they set off for the tournament and after they arrived back home. ECC Austria, as the representative of one of the host countries, was in the

frontline with helping consumers and contributed actively to the UEFA/Commission website.

CONCRETE “SUCCESS STORIES”

UK consumer — Maltese trader — holiday

Whilst on holiday in Malta, a UK resident was approached and told that she had won a free holiday. When she went to claim the prize she ended up having to listen to a holiday club sales presentation and eventually signed a contract for a holiday club membership scheme. The consumer was assured that no money would be withdrawn until she had returned home. On returning home, the consumer discovered that the trader had withdrawn money from her account the day after she had signed the contract. Although the contract did not contain a cancellation clause, the consumer managed to persuade the marketing company to cancel the contract but was not refunded the deposit paid. After the intervention of the ECCs, the consumer was refunded the full deposit of £475.

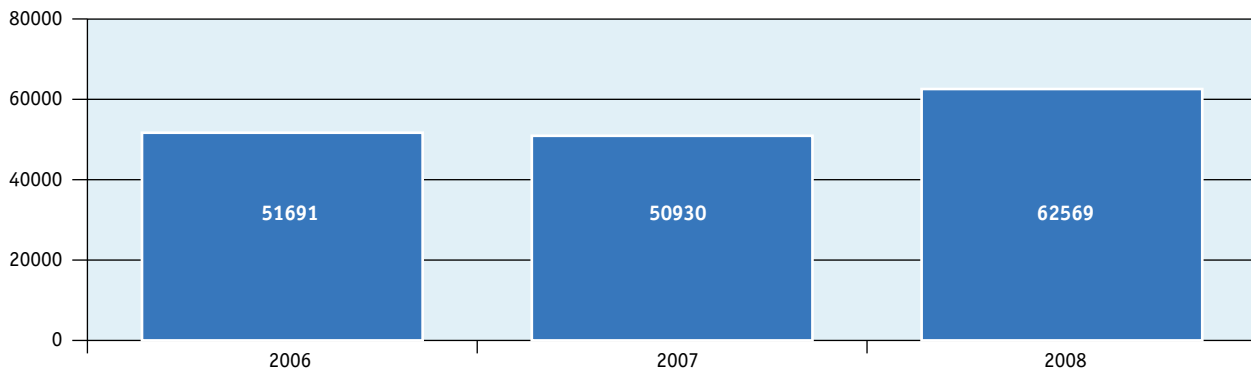
5 OVERVIEW OF CASES HANDLED BY ECCs

5.1 Volume of cases

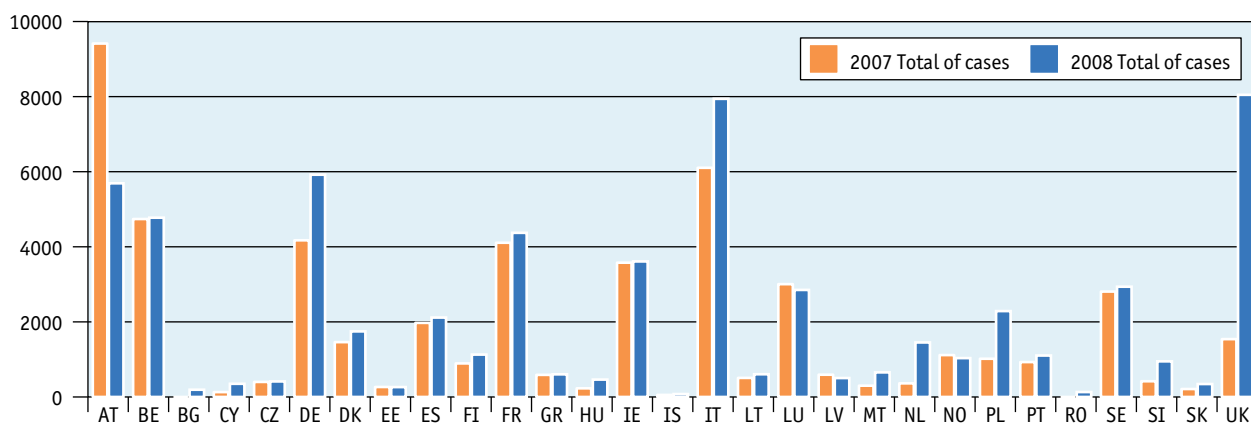
In 2008, the European Consumer Centres Network (ECC-Net) handled over 62 000 requests from consumers for information and advice on cross-border shopping (both in person and online). The facts and figures presented in this chapter are based on case-handling information from the IT tool used by the ECCs.

The number of cases dealt with by ECC-Net in 2008 showed an increase of over 22.85 % compared with 2007.

Trend over the years — Total number of cases



Volume of cases per country (2007-2008)



This increase in 2008 was particularly visible in the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands and Slovenia.

The substantial increase in the number of cases handled by ECC UK was due to the fact that ECC UK opened in August 2007 and therefore dealt with only a few cases in that year. Consequently, 2008 was the first full year of operation of this new centre.

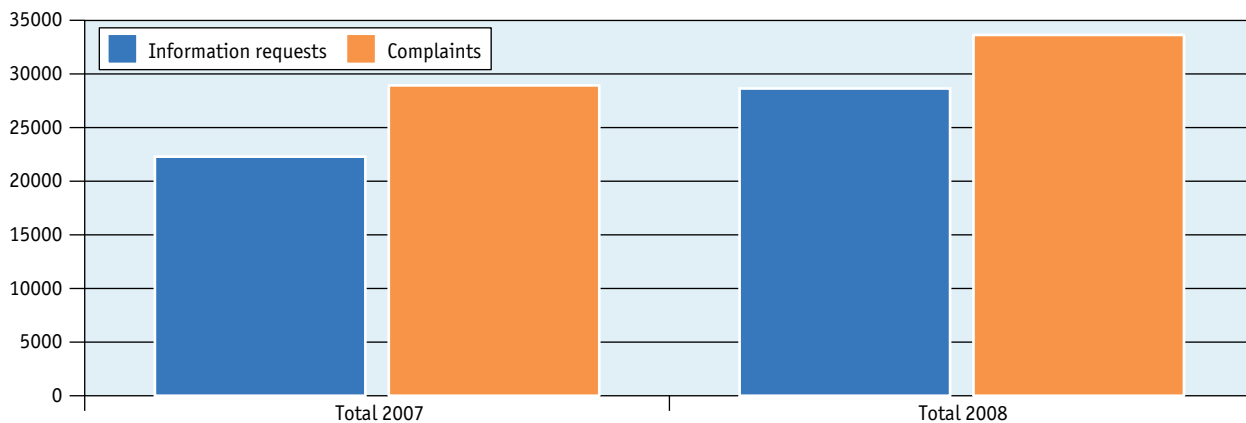


A small group of countries handled the largest share of all network cases. The United Kingdom (8 048), Italy (7 941), Germany (5 920) and Austria (5 691) together handled 44.11 % of all the cases. This shows a greater concentration of cases in just a few countries than in 2007.

5.2 Volume of requests for information and complaints

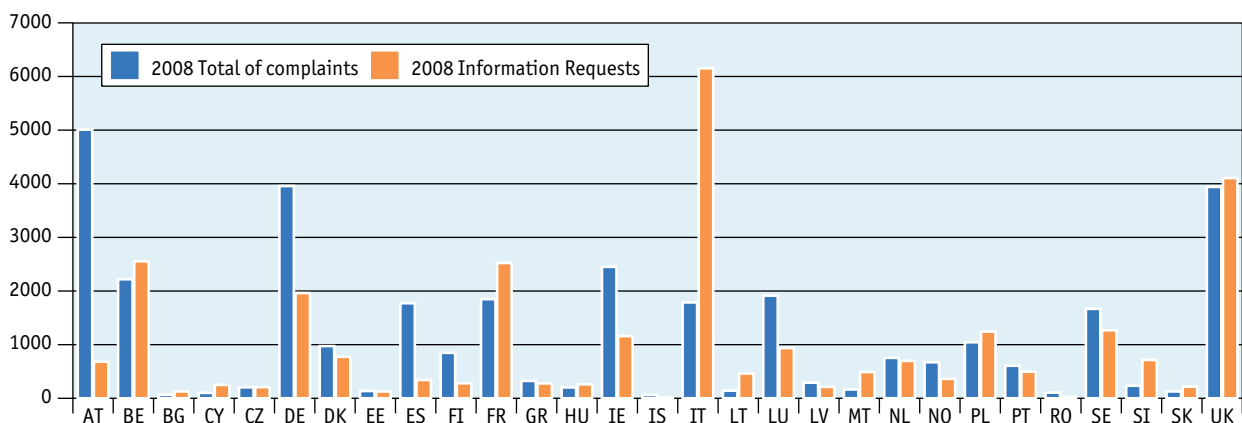
ECC-Net handles different types of requests for information and complaints from consumers (simple and normal complaints⁴).

Volume of information requests and complaints



Both in 2008 and in 2007, the number of complaints from consumers was higher than the number of requests for information. In 2008, complaints accounted for 53.75 % of all the cases handled by the ECCs, with a total of 33 636. However, the number of requests for information grew substantially (by 29.8 %) from 2007 to 2008.

Volume of complaints and information requests per country



⁴ A request for information is a query from a consumer regarding a consumer issue not related to a complaint. A complaint is a statement of dissatisfaction by a consumer concerning a cross-border transaction with a seller or a supplier. A simple complaint is a complaint which requires no follow-up by an ECC, i.e. a 'one-step operation' where advice is given to the consumer. A normal complaint is any complaint which requires subsequent intervention or follow-up by an ECC and is therefore shared with the ECC of the country where the trader is based.



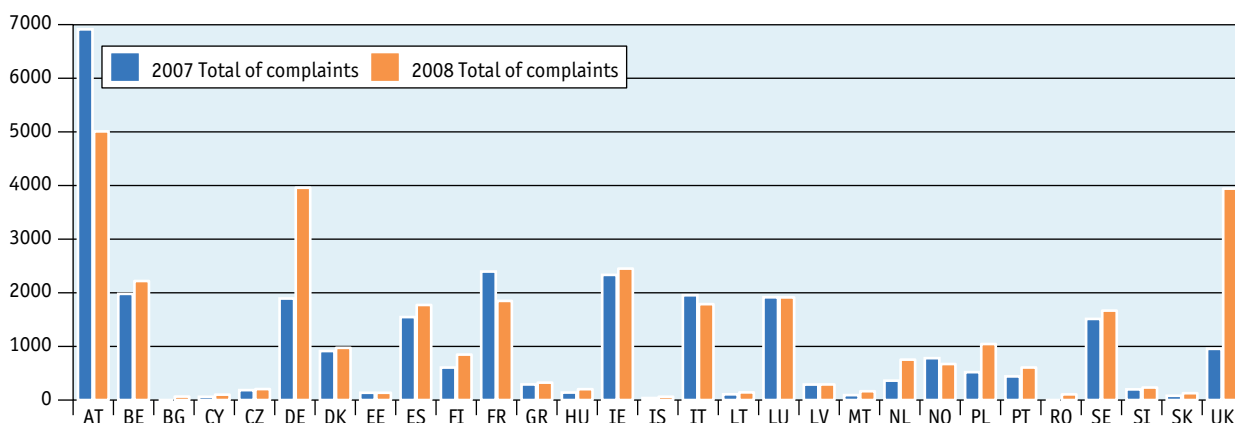
Complaints and requests for information are very unevenly spread between countries. Some ECCs handle more requests for information than complaints (Italy is a striking example of this).

Others (e.g. ECC Austria and ECC Germany) handle a significantly higher proportion of complaints than requests for information. Differences like these are the result of a combination of factors, including consumers' knowledge about their rights and the services provided by ECCs, the level of compliance with legislation and the level of assistance provided by other bodies at national level.

5.3 Complaints

In 2008, consumers submitted 33 636 complaints (simple and normal) to ECC-Net. Three centres — Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom — handled more than one third of them.

Volume of complaints per country in 2007 and 2008



5.4 Complaints by sector

The table below provides information on the 'normal complaints' per sector, i.e. those jointly handled by two centres, the ECC of the country of the consumer and the ECC of the country of the trader.

In 2008, consumers complained mainly about transport services (33.23 %), recreational and cultural services (25.42 %) and restaurant, hotel and accommodation services (13.38 %). These three sectors generated 72 % of all complaints received by ECC-Net.

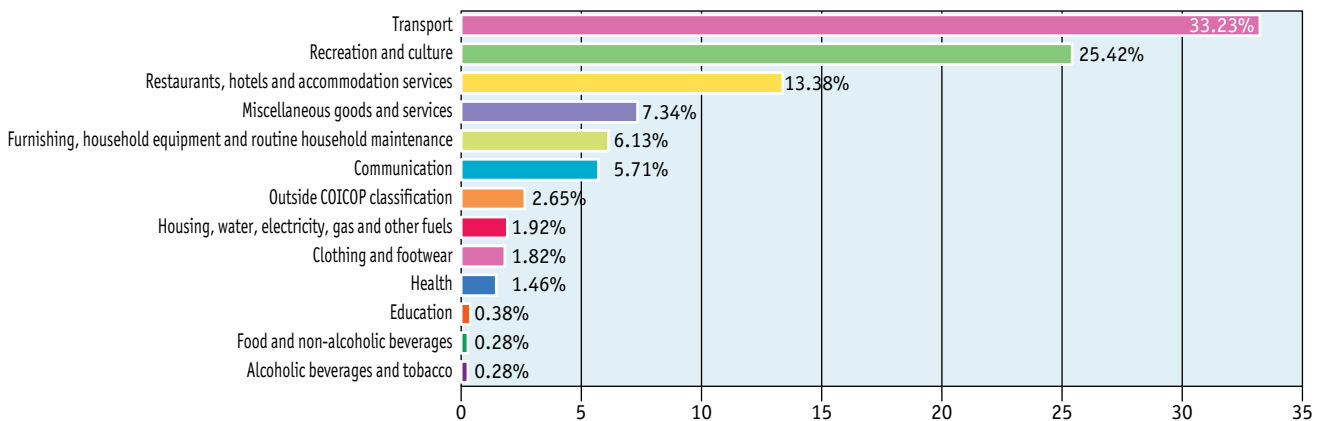


In 2008, complaints about transport increased by 10 % compared with the number in 2007. This can be explained by greater awareness on the part of consumers and the important role played by ECC-Net in this specific area.

Recreational and cultural services accounted for over 25.42 % of complaints in 2008, an increase of 12 % on 2007.

Restaurants, hotel and accommodation services generated 13.38 %. Compared with 2007, this was an increase of approximately 5 %.

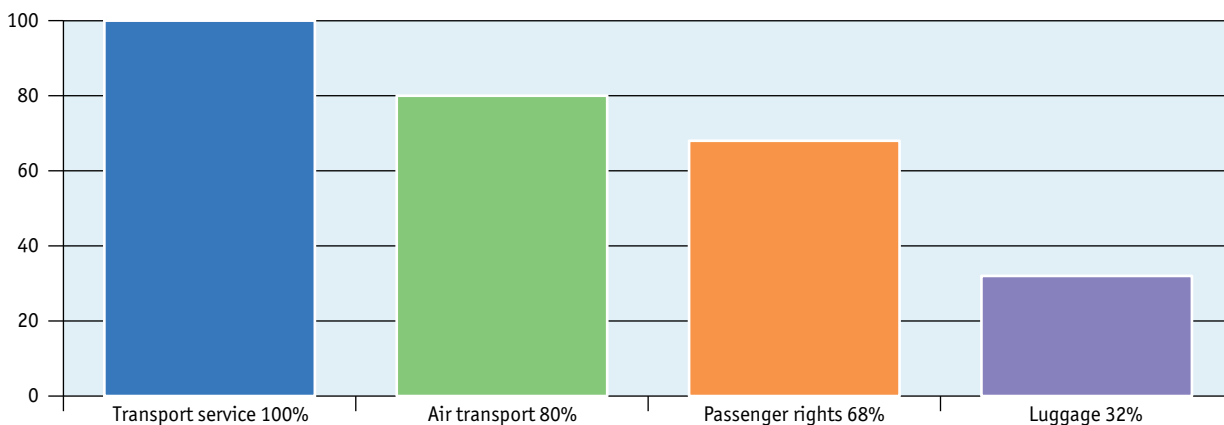
Normal complaints per sector



Transport – Air transport

Over 30 % of all complaints received from consumers were because of dissatisfaction with transport services. Within transport-related complaints, 80 % were about air transport and within this category cases linked to the Regulation on air passenger rights made up approximately two thirds (delays, cancellations, etc.) while the other third concerned issues related to luggage (loss or theft).

Complaints in the air transport sector



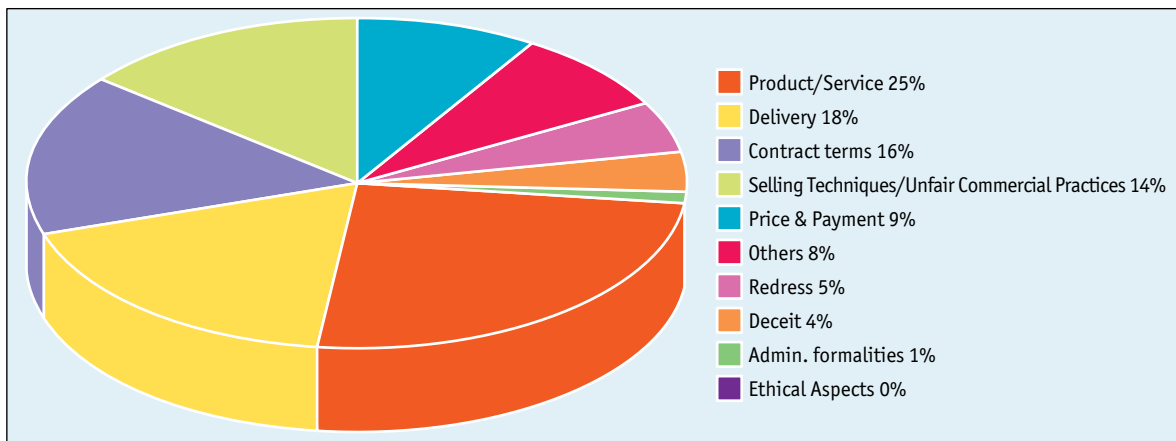
5.5 Nature of complaints — Categories

In 2008, the bulk of complaints (approximately three-quarters) related to dissatisfaction with products or services (25 % of all complaints), followed by delivery (18 %), terms of contract (16 %) and unfair commercial practices (14 %).

In comparison with 2007, complaints about products and services (covering non-delivery, defective products and services, non-conformity of a product or service, etc.) increased.

The number of complaints about unfair commercial practices showed the biggest increase: from 5% in 2007 to 14% in 2008. This could be related to the entry into force of the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive in 2008.

Nature of complaints by sector

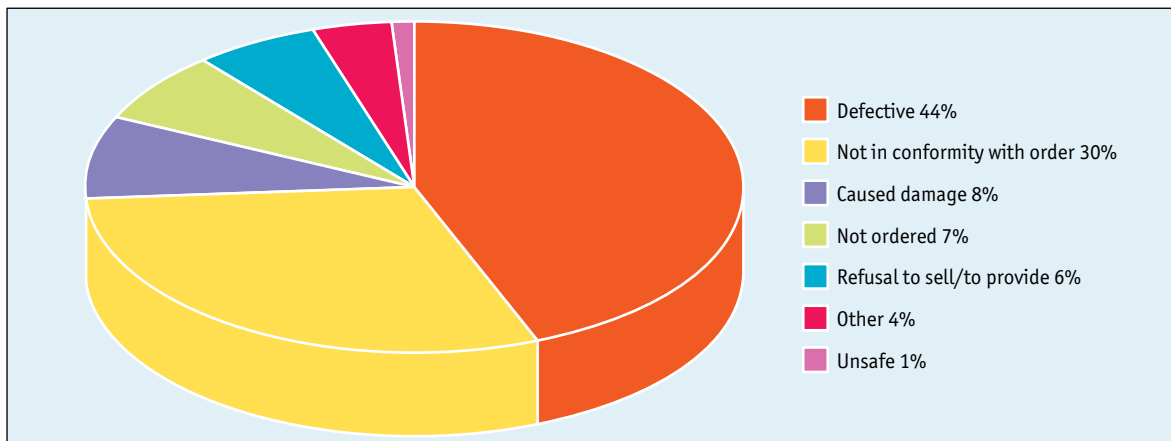




5.6 Nature of complaints — Sub-categories

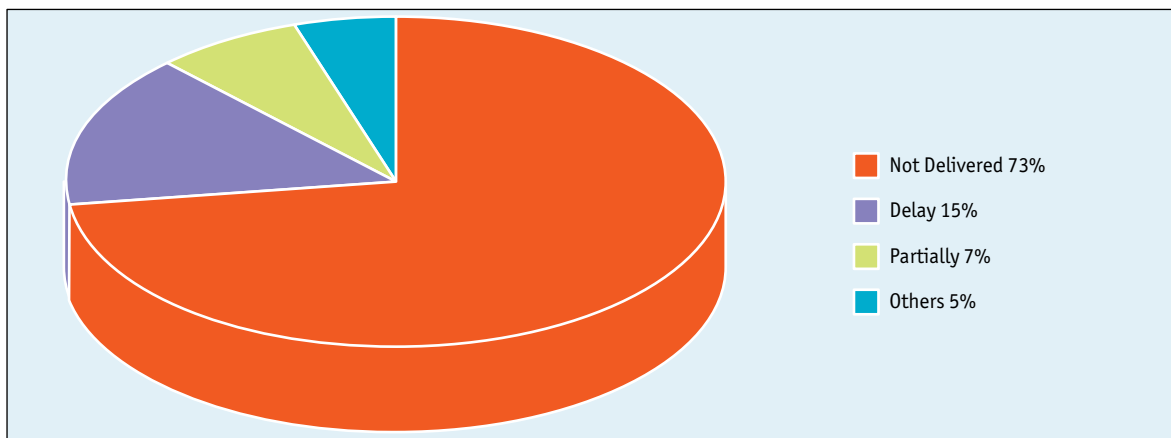
The three charts below give details of the main sub-categories of complaints.

Complaints product/service



Problems with products or services are the largest category, accounting for 25 % of all complaints. Within this category, problems with defective products accounted for the largest share (44 %) of cases, followed by problems with products or services which failed to match the order (30 %). Other problems in this category were products which were unsafe or caused damage (9 %), products which had not been ordered (7 %) and traders refusing to sell or provide the service (6 %).

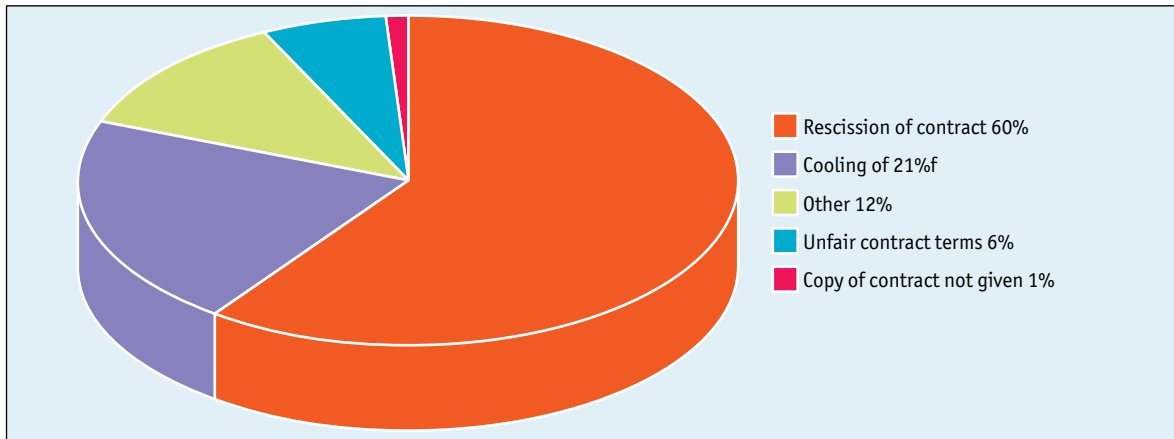
Complaints delivery



The second most common category of complaints were about problems with delivery, where the largest category concerned simple non-delivery of the product (73 % of all cases in this category). Other complaints related to delayed

delivery (15%), partial delivery (7%), where only part of the order was supplied, and others (5%).

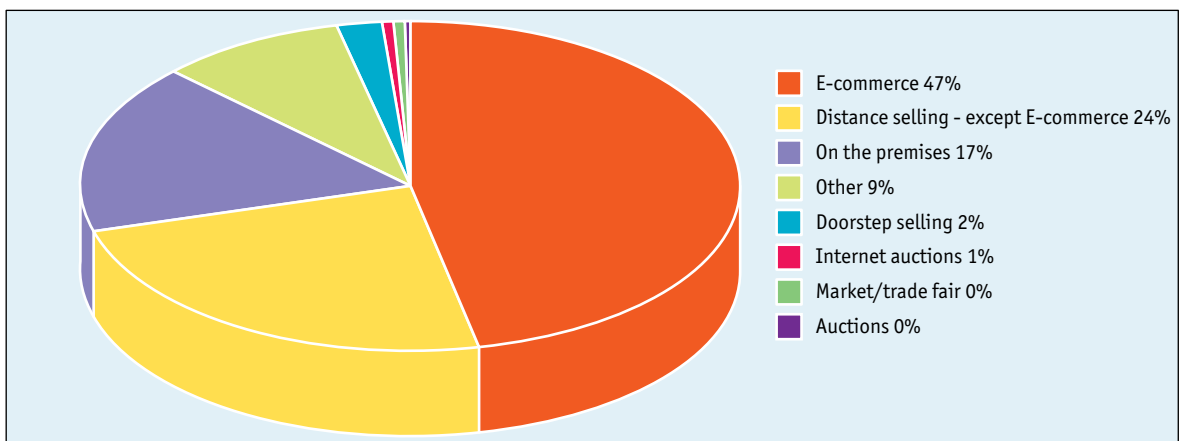
Complaints term of contract



Under terms of contract, the three main headings of complaint are: rescission of contract with 60%, the cooling-off period (21%) and other (12%).

5.7 Type of transaction

Type of transaction



Almost half of all complaints (47%) stemmed from e-commerce transactions. Second came complaints arising from 'distance selling' which moved up to 24% of all complaints, 15% more than the previous year. In third place were complaints arising from transactions 'on the premises' of the seller, with 17%.



According to a report on e-commerce produced by ECC-Net⁵, delivery of the items ordered (non-delivery of the product, partial delivery or delayed delivery) constitutes by far the leading cause of complaints by consumers. The second most common causes for complaint relates to problems with defective products, products or services not matching the order, products which had not been ordered, traders refusing to sell or to provide the service and products that were unsafe or caused damage.

5 'The European Online Marketplace: Consumer complaints 2007 — A summary and analysis of consumer complaints reported to the European Consumer Centres Network', 2008.



6. ACTIVITIES OF THE EUROPEAN CONSUMER CENTRES



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AUSTRIA

The main highlight of ECC Austria's information activities in 2008 was the campaign on the UEFA Euro 2008 football tournament in Austria and Switzerland, when ECC Austria was at the frontline in helping fans and consumers attending matches.

Events

For the first time, ECC Austria advised consumers at the Vienna Holiday Fair (Wiener Ferienmesse), one of the biggest and best-known fairs in Austria. It focused especially on package holidays and air passenger rights.

Promotional activities

One activity which should be especially highlighted is ECC Austria's weekly 'Reise-Helpdesk', a column in one of the most widely read Austrian daily newspapers, where ECC Austria answered questions from consumers on travel-related issues and gave useful tips to readers.

ECC Austria also published the flyer 'Your rights during vacation' ('Ihre Rechte im Urlaub'), a brochure on 'Booking holidays over the Internet' (online booking) and another brochure on 'Ski-resorts in Europe 2008/2009' comparing offers and prices from approximately 100 ski-resorts in Austria, Italy, Slovenia, Germany and France.

Media work comprised almost weekly updates on ECC Austria's website www.europakonsument.at, including several press releases and a press conference on travel-related issues which were also sent to the Austrian media. ECC Austria gave 27 TV interviews, 21 radio interviews and 15 interviews to newspapers and magazines. ECC Austria's website, one of the main channels for general information on cross-border purchases, was updated almost weekly.

The centre published articles on cross-border consumer issues in Austria's exclusive independent consumer magazine 'Konsument' throughout the year.

ECC Austria contributed information for the European school diary for young pupils in Europe. It also gave 65 lectures to school students during 2008.

Joint projects

ECC Austria participated in the joint projects on e-commerce and on ADR.

In 2008 staff from ECC Austria made a study visit to ECC Poland. Staff from ECC Denmark, ECC Ireland, ECC Sweden and ECC Slovenia visited ECC Austria to exchange experience and good practice.

ADR

Several meetings were held with the Austrian Ministry for Social Security and Consumer Protection to discuss new ways of promoting the ADR systems in Austria. Complaints were received from consumers about several Internet rip-off companies (especially via ECC Austria's Europe hotline).

BELGIUM



ECC Belgium focused mainly on case-handling, followed by information processing, representation and collaboration with other centres or organisations.

Events

ECC Belgium hosted a number of visits to the centre, including the official visit by Commissioner Kuneva in September.

Promotional activities

The main medium used by ECC Belgium to spread information is the Internet. ECC Belgium focused on preparing a comprehensive electronic newsletter every month. It contains at least one in-depth article on consumer rights in Europe, European and Belgian news of importance to consumers, one case story giving legal background and three success stories.

ECC Belgium compiled a practical guide for travellers. Another regular feature started in 2008 was the series of FAQs, dealing with eight different aspects of consumer rights in the EU. Every article is translated into French or Dutch, and ECC Belgium also continued to build up the English pages of its website. This approach proved successful: in 2008, the number of subscribers to the newsletter increased by 15% and the number of visitors by 18%.

In addition, ECC Belgium organised the 'Best Consumer Campaign' contest together with the Commission Representation in Belgium and helped organise the international press conference on the ECC-Net report on complaints about e-commerce. ECC Belgium issued 10 press releases and gave 22 interviews to national TV and radio broadcasters. The Belgian centre also participated in a campaign mounted by its host organisation at Brussels airport. ECC Belgium visited all the airline counters and asked what the companies do in the event of problems with flights (cancellations and delays). Only 36% of the airlines questioned provided information on demand. ECC Belgium also publicised a leaflet on 'Paying on the Internet' on different payment methods.

Network activities

Delegations from Japan and Thailand as well as ECC Greece (study visit) visited ECC Belgium. ECC Belgium made a study visit to ECC Luxembourg and ECC Netherlands and acted as mentor for ECC Romania.

Joint projects

In collaboration with ECC Poland, ECC Belgium launched a study on the different ways to send money from Belgium to Poland and how much they cost and produced a leaflet in English on this subject that was translated into French, Dutch and Polish and published on its website.

ECC Belgium also participated in the joint project on tourism led by ECC France.

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BULGARIA

The European Consumer Centre in Bulgaria opened officially in February 2008. Since then, ECC Bulgaria has become a recognisable institution in Bulgaria with its own prerogatives and activities. At the very beginning consumers complained mainly about national issues, but after a series of promotional activities complaints regarding cross-border issues gradually rose. The centre currently employs four people full time.

Events

The centre organised four seminars on ECC-Net activities and ECC Bulgaria's own objectives: (1) a working seminar to promote ECC Bulgaria (February); (2) a seminar on development of ADR in Bulgaria (May); (3) a meeting with non-governmental organisations dealing with consumer protection issues (May); and (4) 'School for consumers' (October).

During its first year of activities, the centre established solid cooperation with all stakeholders on consumer protection — the Commission for Consumer Protection (as the host organisation), the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy, the Civil Aviation Office, all non-governmental consumer associations, business associations, companies and other European networks. Representatives of the centre participated in all relevant events, disseminated information and promoted the ECC.

Promotional activities

The centre set up a small library on consumer issues, which so far has 80 titles and has subscribed to the CIELA law database, the State Gazette and the 'Consumer' magazine.

ECC Bulgaria issued four leaflets on: 'The European Consumers Centre Bulgaria — About us', 'Tourist packages and services', 'Cross-border shopping' and 'Main consumer rights when travelling within the EU'. The brochures were distributed via the centre, the central and regional offices of the Bulgarian Commission for Consumer Protection and non-governmental organisations. Events and seminars organised by the centre or other stakeholders were also used to promote ECC Bulgaria's activities.

Active interest was shown by the media in the activities of ECC Bulgaria. Representatives of the centre participated in a number of interviews and broadcasts on different TV and radio programmes. Press releases were regularly issued and reflected in articles and publications in the electronic media and newspapers.

The first year of the ECC's work also saw the publication of the ECC Bulgaria webpage <http://ecc.kzp.bg>, where consumers can obtain useful information on their rights and on the prerogatives and activities of the centre or submit a complaint.

Complaints

By the end of 2008, a total of 174 requests for information had been registered by the IT tool. In addition, 58 simple complaints and 60 normal complaints had been submitted. In 18 of the shared cases, ECC Bulgaria acted as the trader ECC and in the other 42 as the consumer ECC. Some 40 % of the shared cases concerned infringements of air passenger rights.

CYPRUS



In 2008, ECC Cyprus carried out a number of promotional activities to raise consumers' awareness of their rights in connection with cross-border purchases. ECC Cyprus concentrated on communication to make consumers, stakeholders and the media aware of the services that the centre provides. One highlight was the launch of the centre's new website, featuring 'Howard the shopping assistant'.

Events

ECC Cyprus organised seminars on 'E-commerce — shopping online' and on 'ECC — A useful tool for consumers'. The first of these seminars was held in Nicosia and Limassol in May. The second was held in Paphos in February and repeated in Larnaca in October.

In March, members of the centre visited four high schools in Nicosia and one in a rural area to give presentations on the activities of the centre. A questionnaire on consumer rights and ECC-Net was circulated among students.

Promotional activities

During the year several articles were published in newspapers and magazines on 'e-commerce', 'Air passenger rights', 'Unfair commercial practices' and 'How well informed are students of their rights as consumers?'

Two leaflets were also published and disseminated to consumers and relevant stakeholders, one on 'Purchases online', the other on 'Car rental in Cyprus'.

The 2007 Annual Report on the activities of ECC Cyprus was published and disseminated to stakeholders. During 2008, members of the staff gave a number of interviews on TV and radio programmes on the centre's aims and activities.

Network activities

Staff from ECC Cyprus participated in all the meetings of the network and in various events organised by other ECCs such as the conference on 'Alternative Consumer Dispute Resolution: Proposed ADR Mechanism in Slovenia and Experience of ECC-Net' in May in Slovenia, a study visit to ECC Germany in Kehl in June, the Cooperation Day and IT tool training session in Paris in December and the Presidency event in Paris in December.

Joint projects

ECC Cyprus participated in the ECC-Net joint projects on 'Tourism', 'e-commerce' and 'Air passenger rights'.

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CZECH REPUBLIC

ECC CZ was closely involved in promoting the ADR system, as a member of the stakeholders' ADR project. The ECC's bilingual website was one of the most effective and successful ways to inform consumers. The number of visitors to the website (23 075) more than doubled in 2008 compared with 2007. The target of 1 400 visitors per month in 2008 was beaten by a long way.

Events

ECC CZ shared experience in discussions in various international workshops in Budapest (on the ADR system) and in Stockholm (on air passenger rights) and with representatives of the Lithuanian surveillance authority, Civic Belarus Association and a Thai ministry delegation.

As part of the 'Best Consumer Campaign' competition organised by the Commission to mark Consumer Day, the ECC arranged the national round. The winner, run by Czech TV, went through to the international final in Brussels. Other activities were organised by the ECC to mark Consumer Day.

Promotional activities

The ECC disseminated a leaflet on out-of-court dispute resolution in the Czech Republic (in Czech, English and German) and another on air passenger rights.

The ECC's legal statements and proposed solutions to the most frequent consumer complaints about cross-border transactions were repeatedly broadcasted on Czech TV (in the programme called 'Black Sheep').

Eight articles, press releases and interviews were published in newspapers, via the Czech Press Agency, and broadcast on the Czech radio station Radiožurnál. Three lectures were given to consumer protection organisations and Europe Direct branches.

ECC CZ's Annual Report for 2007 was disseminated and a CD on the ECC's activities was produced.

Network activities

ECC CZ participated in the round-table discussion with Commissioner Kuneva at the Commission Representation in Prague.

ECC CZ also advertised ECC-Net functions in the brochure 'EU at hand' about the European networks in the Czech Republic, prepared by the Commission Representation in Prague, and helped to disseminate it. The centre translated the UEFA flyer 'Your rights are our goal' on the Euro 2008 football championship and published it on the ministry's homepage.

Joint projects

The centre participated in the ECC-Net joint projects on e-commerce, on ADR systems and on shopping in Europe. The final results were published on ECC CZ's website.

A representative from ECC CZ participated in all ECC-Net meetings in 2008, chaired discussions on case-handling protocol on the ECC-Net Cooperation Day in Paris and tested the IT tool complaints form. The centre also made a study visit to ECC Luxembourg.

ADR/complaints

The ADR system was launched in April 2008 and the promotional campaign was successful — by the end of 2008, a total of 1 077 cases had been resolved. The system helps to solve cross-border disputes and the ECC helped to create the conditions for the system to fulfil this function.

The number of requests for information and advice answered fell slightly in 2008 (to 208 cases from 214 in 2007). The number of consumer complaints and disputes solved increased by 12% to 213 (from 190 in 2007).

DENMARK



In 2008 ECC Denmark continued to promote Howard, the interactive shopping assistant which it had developed in 2007. By the end of 2008 Howard was available in 10 European countries (Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the UK) in eight languages. Howard is a small web-based tool created to inform consumers about their rights when shopping online and to make it easier for them to shop online without getting cheated. Howard helps consumers avoid fraudulent traders and find the serious web traders and provides advice on shopping. In 2008, the Danish version of Howard was used more than 24 000 times. Howard is available at www.forbrugereuropa.dk/howard.

ECC Denmark's mobile service for air passengers introduced in 2007 was used by 5 500 consumers in 2008. The service provides information on the spot about air passenger rights in the event of delayed or cancelled flights, denied boarding and luggage problems. It is free of charge and available in both Danish (www.fly.forbrug.dk) and English (flight.forbrug.dk) from all mobile phones with an Internet browser and from all over the world.

To make the information more readily available to consumers and help consumers around the clock, a new online assistant called Emma was introduced on the website at the end of 2008. Thanks to Emma, consumers no longer have to find the information themselves. They can just type their question and Emma will then answer them and guide them to additional information. Everyone can now ask Emma questions at www.forbrugereuropa.dk.

Promotional activities

ECC Denmark continued to develop its website which was redesigned to present the main topics more clearly to users. A great deal of information on cross-border shopping is available on the website and is being added. Around 115 000 consumers visited the website in 2008.

To make consumers aware of their rights and of ECC services, ECC Denmark gave more than 70 interviews to national TV stations, radio stations and newspapers and gave presentations at a number of national and international events. ECC Denmark also promoted its services with banner ads on the Internet.

At the end of the year ECC Denmark published a leaflet informing foreign consumers how consumer complaints are dealt with in Denmark, focusing on the Danish complaints board system. The leaflet was distributed to the other consumer centres in the network and to embassies.

Network activities

Staff from ECC Denmark also participated actively in several joint projects organised by the network, attended a number of conferences, gave presentations at several of them and participated in study visits with other centres.

ADR/complaints

The number of cases handled rose again in 2008 to more than 1 900.

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ESTONIA

The main highlight in 2008 for ECC Estonia was the countrywide campaign about Internet shopping, carried out in March. Under the title 'Were you ripped off on the Internet?' the campaign included street advertisements in the four largest cities in Estonia, an Internet banner on one of Estonia's most popular news portals, articles in different media and information on the centre's website www.consumer.ee. As part of the campaign, ECC Estonia also celebrated International Consumer Day in March.

Internet shopping was selected as the theme for the campaign because this is the main problem Estonian consumers complain about. The purpose was to raise consumers' awareness of how to protect themselves against fraudulent e-traders and to educate consumers on legislation in Estonia and in the European Union. The campaign was publicised by several radio stations and on TV.

Events

ECC Estonia hosted the third meeting of Baltic ECCs (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in Tallinn. The three ECCs reported on their activities and discussed possible common activities for 2009 and case-handling, particularly the main principles, deadlines and problem traders.

Promotional activities

ECC Estonia published two leaflets about car rental. One targeted Estonian consumers who would like to know more about renting a car in Europe and the other was for foreign consumers renting a car in Estonia. ECC Estonia published several articles and press releases, mostly on e-commerce, a particular problem area in 2008.

The website www.consumer.ee/kampaania provides information about ECC Estonia and its activities.

Network activities

In May, ECC Estonia celebrated the European Day with representatives of other European networks (Europe Direct, EURES, Europass, etc.) in Estonia.

ECC Estonia stepped up its cooperation with other EU networks in 2008, with several joint events organised by the Estonian Representation of the European Commission and the Estonian State Chancellery.

FINLAND



2008 was a jubilee year for consumer protection in Finland. Consumer protection legislation, consumer advice services and out-of-court dispute resolution mechanisms celebrated their 30th anniversary in the country in September.

The celebrations of this milestone culminated when Commissioner Kuneva presented Finland with the first-ever EU Consumer Champion Award for 'Galactor and the code-breakers', an online game for teenagers. ECC Finland presented the Finnish ADR system at the September network meeting in Brussels.

The ECC's role in providing consumers with information in individual cases is less important in Finland than in other Member States due to the Finnish consumer adviser chain which provides consumers with first-aid on cross-border matters. ECC Finland provides training for the advisers and organised two sessions in 2008. In addition, a new extranet site on cross-border issues was set up for the advisers.

Promotional activities

The main channel for promoting the ECC network and cross-border topics is the ECC website which provides consumers with information on cross-border topics in Finnish, Swedish and English. The Finnish pages were redesigned and new topics were entered in the form of front-page news or press releases, 23 in all. These generated three TV and three radio interviews and more than 50 articles in the written media.

The most closely followed topic was a Nordic travel agency's offer of a free package tour to Venice. Consumers, by now experienced with dubious offers of free products and services, were on the look-out and kept the hotline busy.

Developments in European policy were highlighted on the website. A price comparison about purchases of contact lenses from online stores was also published.

Network activities

ECC Finland was also active on networking and communicating with the Commission about the case-handling IT tool. Staff from ECC Finland met their counterparts during study visits to Spain and the UK and participated in the air passenger rights seminar in Stockholm, the Presidency conference in Ljubljana and the Baltic Sea ADR seminar in Riga. In addition, ECC Finland hosted a study visit from ECC Latvia. At the Cooperation Day in Paris, ECC Finland contributed with a proposal to harmonise some of the messages of the network. Finally, 'Howard the shopping assistant' was made available to Finnish consumers.

Complaints

In 2008, the number of contacts was 44% higher than in 2007, climbing to 1 278 registered cases. The number one causes for complaints were, for the second year running, mobile phone services from Belgium and the Netherlands. 61% of the cases dealt with were closed with an amicable settlement. Alarming, however, 20% of all shared cases (normal complaints) had to be closed because it proved impossible to make contact with the trader.

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FRANCE

In 2008, ECC France launched a new website featuring an online complaint form for consumers which allowed the centre to cope with the steadily increasing number of complaints.

ECC France contributed to consultations and participated in various conferences, seminars and working groups on topics such as the Commission's proposal for a Directive on consumer rights, the Green Paper on collective redress and cooperation with the Consumer Protection Cooperation Committee. ECC France also participated in the exchanges with the Commission on the IT tool and started participating in the scoreboard.

Events

Two of the highlights in 2008 were the participation in the French Presidency Conference 'Which protection for European consumers? Issues at stake and challenges ahead' in Paris and organisation of the annual Cooperation Day in Paris, which focused on case-handling issues.

Together with the French Presidency teams of the Prefecture, the centre organised a 'going local' event at Strasbourg airport in July, in the form of an information campaign on air passenger rights in the boarding area for two European flights, bound for Amsterdam and Prague. Staff from the centre met passengers at the stand, informed them of their rights and distributed the new French brochure 'Passagers aériens: Voyagez malin!' ('Air passengers: Travel smart!'). The Prefect of Alsace talked informally with passengers, informing them about the role of the ECC and the new brochure. This event was given prominent media coverage.

Promotional activities

Throughout 2008, ECC France concentrated on communication in order to raise the awareness of consumers, stakeholders and the media of the useful information and assistance the centre can provide to consumers in the EU. The centre participated in the 'Consumer Day' in Brussels, organised by the European Commission, and held a competition to select the French finalist for the 'Best Consumer Campaign'. ECC France staff gave several lectures in universities and colleges. The centre published a brochure on air passenger rights with very practical tips on how to avoid problems with airlines and where to turn to if a problem occurs.

ECC France participated in a two-year pilot programme to prepare an educational tool for young consumers (15-20 years). It also manned two information stands at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Network activities

In order to promote ECC-Net, ECC France, together with ECC Germany, produced a CD-ROM explaining how the network works and the most important consumer rights aspects. This CD is used to present the network and its activities at all kinds of events.

Joint projects

ECC France contributed to the reports on e-commerce and on ADR and coordinated the project on tourism.

ADR/complaints

In 2008, ECC France dealt in particular with e-commerce cases (mainly non-delivery and guarantee issues) and complaints about transport and tourism (mainly air passenger rights, in particular flight cancellations and delays and lost luggage).

ECC France continued its regular contacts with ADRs in the e-commerce sector and with businesses and the NEBs. It also established new contacts with ADRs in other sectors (electronic communications and energy), e.g. the 'Médiateur Gaz de France'.

GERMANY



In 2008, strong emphasis was placed on the commitment to consumer policy issues: ECC Germany contributed to consultations and participated in various conferences, seminars and working groups on topics like the Commission's proposal for a Directive on consumer rights, the Green Paper on collective redress and cooperation with the Consumer Protection Cooperation Committee. Amongst others, ECC Germany participated in the conference 'Which protection for European consumers? Issues at stake and challenges ahead' organised by the French Presidency in Paris and in a review of the existing consumer protection legislation.

Events

ECC Germany contributed to the first European Consumer Day by organising a competition to select the German finalist for the 'Best Consumer Campaign' contest. For the launch of the UEFA 2008 helpline in Strasbourg, ECC Germany organised a press conference by Commissioner Kuneva. In order to inform air passengers about their rights, the centre organised an event at Strasbourg airport, which was covered by the press.

Promotional activities

ECC Germany launched a completely redesigned website and a new common portal with ECC France. In order to make external activities on ECC-Net as interesting as possible, ECC Germany produced a multimedia CD-ROM explaining how the network works along with the most important consumer rights aspects.

Network activities

Together with ECC France and other ECCs, ECC Germany prepared and contributed to the case-handlers' and Directors' meetings to mark Cooperation Day in Paris. ECC Germany contributed to the report on e-commerce, participated in the joint project on ADR and coordinated the joint project on tourism.

Complaints

As in previous years, the number of cases increased steadily throughout 2008. In order to facilitate the first contact for consumers and the work of ECC case-handlers, ECC Germany included an online form on its new homepage.

In 2008, ECC Germany dealt in particular with cases relating to purchases of goods and services. Problems on the Internet (non-delivery and guarantee issues), cases involving unintentional paid subscriptions and cold calling all gave rise to requests for information and complaints from consumers. Furthermore, just as in 2007, air passenger rights, in particular flight cancellations and delays or lost luggage accounted for a large proportion of the complaints received from consumers.

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GREECE

ECC Greece launched a major communication campaign on consumers' rights, advertising on public transport with the support of the Ministry of Transportation and Communication.

Events

ECC Greece participated in various events, organised mainly by local consumer associations, where the ECC's activities and role were explained and promotional material was disseminated.

ECC Greece organised a conference in Athens in November to present the situation of Greek consumers in the European marketplace. The event received full coverage by the media and was attended by a large number of participants, representing consumer associations and stakeholders, public authorities and the business community.

Promotional activities

Promotional activities run by ECC Greece aimed at increasing consumers' awareness of their rights in cross-border transactions within the EU.

On International Consumer Day, ECC Greece distributed its e-commerce leaflet to consumers all over Greece with the cooperation of the leading consumer organisations in the country. The aim was to inform citizens about the ECC and its role in cross-border transactions.

ECC Greece produced three leaflets entitled 'Presentation of the ECC', 'Visiting Greece' and 'Car Rental' and the Greek translation of the ECC-Net survey on 'The European Online Marketplace: Consumer complaints 2007'. These leaflets were widely distributed. ECC Greece also produced advertising material (magnets with the ECC-Net logo and the website address, which were distributed at events, presentations and exhibitions). Moreover, a total of eight press releases led to 41 articles, plus TV and radio interviews. In addition, the revamped website includes new themes plus a survey on how consumers heard about ECC Greece.

ECC Greece also sent quarterly reports to the Greek Prefectures and to Chambers of Commerce and Industry informing them of the centre's activities, in an attempt to enhance cooperation on both case-handling and consumer awareness.

ECC Greece gave presentations to high schools in the Athens area, in order to inform young consumers of their rights by distributing leaflets and other promotional material.

Joint projects

ECC Greece participated in the joint project on e-commerce.

Complaints

All the above-mentioned activities led to a tangible increase in the number of cases compared with last year. ECC Greece received 309 requests for information and 334 complaints.

HUNGARY



ECC Hungary believes it is important to inform young people and educate them to become fully aware consumers. To achieve this, in 2008, in cooperation with the Bács-Kiskun County Department of Europe Direct Hungary, the Centre organised a national quiz for high schools on consumer protection and knowledge of the European Union, which 109 teams entered.

Events

In Hungary the guidelines set out in the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive were implemented on 1 September 2008. To explain the new regulations, ECC Hungary organised a joint international conference together with the National Association of Consumer Protection Organisations entitled 'Consumer Protection – Unfair Commercial Practices'.

Promotional activities

ECC Hungary published leaflets on:

- Passenger rights in the event of cancellations or delays of flights and loss or damage to luggage;
- Alternative ways to settle disputes for consumers;
- Information in English and German about ECC-Net;
- Guarantee and warranty in consumer contracts;
- Unfair commercial practice.

Network activities

ECC Hungary provided a wide range of information for fans travelling to the European football championships, via the national media. Just before the event and throughout the tournament consumers were able to link directly from the ECC Hungary home page to the UEFA website and to the site of ECC Austria set up especially for this occasion. Based on the information received from consumers, via the network and the media, ECC Hungary issued several alerts warning against a deceitful Internet dealer.

The 'You choose!' campaign launched by the European Commission was made available directly from the home page of the ECC website.

'Howard the shopping assistant' is available on the ECC Hungary home page.

Joint projects

ECC Hungary participated in several joint projects, notably in extension of the 'Shopping Guide in Europe' database coordinated by the Hungarian centre. This project resulted in publication of a special 32-page guide on 'Shopping in Europe' in the May issue of the 'KOSÁR' magazine.

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ICELAND

ECC Iceland answered over 20 questionnaires and requests for information from the other centres during the year. It also answered several questionnaires from the European Commission, for example about cross-border online shopping and cross-border selling of financial services, NEBs and collective redress.

In May, as in previous years, the ECC conducted a small survey on the costs of voting in the Eurovision song contest.

Events

Staff from ECC Iceland gave lectures in four courses on consumer rights and finances organised by the Director in cooperation with the host organisation, the Consumers Association of Iceland. The Director also introduced ECC-Net while lecturing as a guest teacher at local colleges, a university and a local seniors centre.

Promotional activities

In 2008, ECC Iceland gave several radio interviews, including two about the Annual Report on the activities of the centre and one about air passenger rights.

ECC Iceland also gave interviews in local newspapers about the European competition to find the best consumer campaign, in which ECC Iceland was involved. The Director appeared on television to discuss, amongst other things, air passenger rights.

To promote its activities, ECC Iceland wrote articles in a local business paper about obstacles on the open market, air passenger rights and the Annual Report on ECC-Net. Several articles about the ECC were also published in the Consumer Magazine, two concerning consumers' complaints and one about the increase in cases dealt with by the ECC.

Efforts were made to update ECC Iceland's website, www.ena.is, more often and, in the course of the year, 30 news bulletins concerning consumers' rights were posted on the site. This led to an increase in the number of hits and visitors to the website. The Director wrote several articles about consumers' rights within the EEA and published them on the webpage of the Consumers Association www.ns.is, which records between 20 000 and 30 000 hits per week.

Network activities

In May 2008, ECC Iceland hosted the second annual meeting of the Nordic centres (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland). Its purpose was to strengthen the relationship between the Nordic centres.

Joint projects

ECC Iceland took part in four ECC-Net meetings in Brussels and in the Cooperation Day in Paris.

It also participated in the joint project on tourism and in a shopping brochure project.

IRELAND



2008 was a busy year for ECC Ireland. In March it played a very active role in celebrating European Consumer Day. A seminar was held on the premises of the European Commission's Representation in Dublin, attended by the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, at which ECC Ireland gave a presentation on consumer rights. The ECC coordinated the competition to find the best national consumer campaign and Ireland won the award for the best European financial information campaign for the launch of the financial regulator's website, www.itsyourmoney.ie.

Events

In October ECC Ireland hosted a visit by Commissioner Kuneva who visited the premises, met the staff and learnt about the centre's activities. The ECC helped to organise the Commissioner's visit which included meetings with the President of Ireland and with the Ministers for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and for Europe. The purpose of Commissioner Kuneva's visit was to discuss the future European Union Action Programme in the field of consumer rights. ECC Ireland also announced the resignation of its Director, Tina Leonard, who led the organisation so successfully for nine years. Tina is still working in the area of consumer protection, as a journalist, in both print and television media, and ECC Ireland wishes her every success in the future.

Promotional activities

Consumer Day was marked by publication of a number of newspaper supplements with information on the ECC and shopping across borders. ECC Ireland published a number of reports, including those on car rental contracts and development of ADR in Ireland, in addition to the 2007 Annual Report which highlighted the work of the ECC to promote cross-border consumer rights in Ireland. The centre co-authored the ECC-Net report on e-commerce, along with the Netherlands and Greece. ECC Ireland issued regular press releases on consumer rights and its staff made frequent appearances on national radio and television. With sponsorship from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the ECC ran a series of adverts on local radio across Ireland on the theme of consumer rights. ECC Ireland staff gave presentations at the Air Passenger Rights Conference in Barcelona, the Consumer Redress Conference in Brussels in March and at the Europäische Rechtsakademie (ERA) in Trier on consumer rights. ECC Ireland provided training on cross-border consumer rights to the staff of the National Consumer Agency, the body responsible for consumer protection in Ireland.

Network activities

Staff from ECC Ireland participated in study visits to ECC Norway and ECC Luxembourg and hosted study visits from ECC Hungary and ECC Denmark. ECC Ireland carried out a staff exchange with ECC Austria.

ADR/complaints

ECC Ireland continued actively to promote development of ADR in Ireland, with publication of a report on ADR, organisation of a meeting on ADR in Ireland and a submission to the Law Reform Commission's report on ADR.

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ITALY

ECC Italy focused on direct contact with consumers to inform them about their rights and enhance their confidence in cross-border purchases within the internal market. Individual assistance to consumers on cross-border issues was provided, including in cooperation with other EU networks and national bodies and authorities.

Events

On European Consumer Day, a press conference was held at the EU Representation in Rome and a promotional event was organised in one of the biggest shopping centres in the city to provide consumers with information, advice on consumer rights and access to ECC-Net assistance on cross-border issues.

ECC Italy participated in a workshop for consumer organisations on ADR in Rome attended by consumers, consumer protection experts, conciliators and mediators, lawyers, Chambers of Commerce, ADR bodies, companies and representatives of business associations.

The centre was invited to present the network at two conferences on ADR at the Chamber of Commerce of Bolzano and at the Faculty of Law of the University of Trento.

Promotional activities

Production of information material has been a priority. The centre published three new guides on product guarantees and safety, nutritional claims and cross-border financial services. It produced several leaflets about ADR, car rental, the European Small Claims Procedure, online lotteries and fraud and real estate purchase in Italy for foreigners.

Promotional activities also included a widely distributed weekly newsletter on key consumer topics, particularly news and regulations, several press releases, regular updates of the website and a constant flow of communication to the media.

Finally, ECC Italy developed several activities targeted on students: information desks at universities, Masters lessons at universities, three study visits to ECC premises in Rome, participation in other EU networks' projects for young people and education about European consumer protection law and policies.

Network activities

ECC Italy took part in many activities within ECC-Net, including joint projects, the Cooperation Day and the Presidency events. It also responded to many surveys and questionnaires from the network and the European Commission. A study visit to ECC Denmark was organised in September, while ECC France, ECC Germany, ECC Malta and ECC Estonia all arranged study visits to ECC Italy.

Complaints

The number of consumers addressing requests to the ECC is increasing every month.

LATVIA



Since one of the main targets of ECC Latvia is to provide consumers with information on their rights and to help them solve possible problems in this area, in 2008 its staff continued to promote ECC-Net and ECC Latvia's activities and informed consumers about air passenger rights, e-commerce and other EU legislation.

Events

At the International Tourism Fair 'Balttour 2008' in Riga, which attracted more than 12 000 visitors, ECC Latvia distributed promotional material and leaflets on distance selling, e-commerce, complex tourism services and air passenger rights in the EU.

The centre participated in the seminar on 'Consumer Rights and Dwellings' organised by the Association for Protection of Consumer Interests.

A press conference on the premises of the EC Representation was organised by ECC Latvia on European Consumer Day, in cooperation with the Consumer Rights Protection Centre. The Director gave a presentation about the ECC and ECC-Net activities, consumer rights protection in the EU and the main cross-border consumer problems submitted to ECC Latvia.

ECC Latvia participated in a seminar in Ventspils and in other seminars organised by Europe Direct and other EU networks in different parts of the country. During these events, ECC Latvia distributed brochures on e-commerce and air passenger rights and answered consumers' questions about their rights.

In September, representatives of ECC Latvia participated in the 'European Union House Initiative' at the open days of the European Commission Representation in the country to promote ECC-Net and inform consumers about their rights when shopping across borders.

Promotional activities

ECC Latvia produced two leaflets in English – 'Cancellation rights and guarantees in Latvia' and a 'Consumer guide for tourists visiting Latvia' – that were distributed at different events.

On International Consumer Day, the Director of ECC Latvia participated in a TV programme entitled 'Good morning Latvia' to inform consumers about their rights within the EU.

In March, representatives of ECC Latvia participated in a regional TV programme to present ECC Latvia's and ECC-Net activities and also e-commerce and air passenger rights within the EU.

Network activities

ECC Latvia participated in two joint ECC-Net projects, one entitled 'The European Online Marketplace: Consumer complaints 2007', the other the ADR project 2008. ECC Latvia continued its collaboration with Latvian Radio where it participated in a discussion on 'How to live better?' informing citizens about e-commerce and their rights under EU law.

ADR/complaints

In November, ECC Latvia organised the fourth Baltic Sea ADR seminar in Riga. The goal was to exchange best practice for development of ADR systems in the Baltic Sea countries and to facilitate efficient cooperation between ECCs and local ADRs.

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LITHUANIA

In 2008 ECC Lithuania focused on providing advice and assistance to consumers and on raising its profile by giving presentations at seminars, conferences and other events and launching promotional and information material (leaflets and brochures on ADR, tourism, air passenger rights, etc.).

One highlight was the launch of 'Howard the shopping assistant', an online tool to assist consumers available on the website www.ecc.lt. Each language version of the website of ECC Lithuania (Lithuanian, English, German, Polish and French) was built up to provide consumers with more information and make the tool more user-friendly. The information provided on the website of ECC Lithuania is regularly updated, taking into account questions from and the needs of both Lithuanian and foreign consumers in 2008. The number of website visitors increased by 35 % compared with 2007.

Events

Representatives of ECC Lithuania participated in the conference on 'What kind of protection for the European consumer? Issues at stake and challenges ahead' and in the conference on promotion of the rights of energy consumers.

ECC Lithuania also participated in the Cooperation Day attended by representatives from all the ECCs and discussed current and future ECC-Net joint projects.

The centre organised a seminar on unfair commercial practices which focused on business and consumer protection. It also organised, in cooperation with the College of Social Sciences, a series of seminars for young people which allowed comprehensive discussions between students, College staff and representatives of ECC Lithuania on relevant consumer issues.

In addition, ECC Lithuania organised a conference entitled 'Vilnius 2009 — European capital of culture and protection of consumer rights'. Representatives of the centre gave an interview on TV following this event.

Promotional activities

In 2008 ECC Lithuania produced eight press publications, 27 publications on the Internet and five press releases. ECC Lithuania also gave one radio interview and five TV interviews (on car rental, air passenger rights, e-commerce, hotel reservation online and travel packages) in the most popular morning show on Lithuanian National Television. The centre added information on the ECC to 25 websites and presented the ECC's activities at seminars, meetings and conferences (nine events in all).

Network activities

Staff from ECC Lithuania went on a study visit to ECC Germany (Kehl), which allowed them to share information and best practice and to prepare their joint project for 2009 on 'Prices for crossing the Baltic Sea by ferry' (price comparison of all ferries crossing the Baltic Sea).

Joint projects

ECC Lithuania produced a brochure entitled 'Shopping and services in Poland and Lithuania' together with ECC Poland.

ADR/complaints

The number of consumers who requested ECC Lithuania for information or assistance with cross-border complaints was higher than expected.

ECC Lithuania organised a seminar on ADR where representatives of consumer protection authorities discussed issues related to development and improvement of the ADR system in Lithuania.

LUXEMBOURG



One of the highlights for ECC Luxembourg was the visit of Commissioner Kuneva on 21 April, when she was introduced to the activities and staff of the centre.

Events

The centre participated in two fairs in Luxembourg to promote ECC-Net and distribute information material. At the beginning of 2008 the centre repeated its 'Operation Train Station' and distributed information and promotional material to consumers travelling abroad from the main railway station in Luxembourg.

ECC Luxembourg participated in several EU-level conferences, for example under the Slovenian and French Presidencies, and other conferences organised at national level.

Promotional activities

In 2008 ECC Luxembourg published several brochures, one of which focused on consumers buying at fairs, and published an updated version of its brochures concerning purchases of real estate in Belgium, France and Germany.

The centre published ten newsletters, sent out press releases and gave numerous interviews to newspapers, radio and television stations on the subject of consumer rights.

Network activities

The centre continued its solid collaboration with the Representation of the European Commission in Luxembourg. Together, in January 2008 they coordinated the competition to find the best national consumer campaign. At the request of the Representation, ECC Luxembourg continued to operate a special consultation service for consumers once a week on the premises of the 'Maison de l'Europe' in Luxembourg City.

Joint projects

In 2008, ECC Luxembourg co-organised, together with the Representation of the Commission, the Information Office of the European Parliament and the 'Mouvement européen', a cycle of monthly conferences on subjects of interest to consumers.

ECC Luxembourg hosted several study visits from its counterparts from ECC Ireland, ECC Belgium, ECC Slovenia, ECC Sweden and ECC CZ.

ECC Luxembourg itself sent staff on study visits to ECC Germany and ECC France and carried out a staff exchange with the Kehl office of ECC Germany.

ADR/complaints

Concerning alternative dispute resolution, in December 2008 ECC Luxembourg published a report on the outcome of cross-border disputes handled by Luxembourg's ADR bodies. As the same questionnaire asked consumers about their knowledge of the ECC, its activities and ECC-Net, a second report, covering these subjects, was published at the same time.

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MALTA

ECC Malta continued in the role it took up in 2007 as the main contact point for information from the Commission to consumers. In 2008 ECC Malta focused on handling enquiries and complaints which reached higher figures than in the previous year.

Events

In January 2008, the centre participated in 'Europe Close to You', an annual fair organised by the European Commission Representation in Malta. This year the theme was the introduction of the euro as Malta's official currency.

The centre participated, jointly with national authorities, in an event held on Consumer Day. ECC Malta manned a helpdesk in La Valletta to which the public could address questions or comments. In conjunction with this event, a two-page feature on the ECC was published in a supplement distributed by a Maltese newspaper. A number of case studies provided by the ECC were also featured in this supplement.

ECC Malta, together with the Home Economists in Action Association, held a seminar on online shopping and provided material to the participants, mainly teachers, to assist them with lecturing to their students on this subject.

The centre also participated in an open day held by its host organisation, the Consumer and Competition Division, where the ECC delivered a presentation on the services offered by the network. The presentation was followed by an interview with a journalist and an article on the work of the centre was featured in the Maltese press.

Promotional activities

As 2008 was the centre's first full year of operation following its re-launch in September 2007, ECC Malta produced a leaflet introducing the centre, followed by another on 'Unfair commercial practices' and a third on 'Online shopping'. Towards the end of 2008, the centre acquired a column in a Sunday newspaper and published a total of ten articles. Apart from providing news in this column, the ECC also issued press releases and updated its website with a number of news items.

Network activities

ECC Malta undertook a study visit to ECC Italy in Rome, where case-handling and ADRs were the main areas discussed.

Joint projects

ECC Malta participated in three joint research projects. It continued to participate in the 'Tourism in Europe' project by drafting a total of seven leaflets on various aspects of tourism in Malta. These are being published in the form of a booklet and distribution will start following the joint launch of the material in 2009. The centre also participated in a joint project on e-commerce. The resultant report entitled 'The European Online Marketplace' was promoted in the Maltese press. Another – on a joint project on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) – should be published in 2009.

THE NETHERLANDS



Events

Two major events in 2008 made a great impact on the ECC: the launch of its website and the official opening of the centre.

In January the www.eccnl.eu website was launched, which has proved to be a very valuable channel for reaching consumers and informing them about their rights in Europe and the activities of ECC Netherlands and ECC-Net. Linked to the launch of the improved website, the centre prepared a press release.

In June ECC Netherlands organised its official opening at the head office of the 'Legal Service Counter' (het Juridisch Loket). Commissioner Kuneva and Minister of Justice van den Honert were special guests, alongside many stakeholders. The official opening was broadly covered in the press giving valuable publicity to ECC Netherlands.

In October a legal adviser gave a presentation to the trainees of the Legal Service Counter. This offered an introduction to the Doorstep Selling Directive and how it had been implemented in the Dutch Civil Code and to the Directive on Unfair Commercial Practices.

Promotional activities

ECC Netherlands promoted its activities throughout the country, among other things by means of presentations about ECC-Net and its activities at 30 Legal Service Counters.

A handbook on case-handling was produced by the Consumer Adviser. This clarifies the work and contains useful guidelines for new employees.

During the year, four newsletters were published (in June, August, October and December 2008). ECC Netherlands issued several press releases covering: the launch of its website (January); European Consumer Day (February); an invitation to the opening of the ECC (May); the opening of the ECC (June); the launch of the report on e-commerce (June); a warning on timeshare (July); and a warning about problems with e-commerce (November).

The centre also published leaflets on the ECC and ECC-Net (in Dutch) and on the Dutch ADR system (in Dutch, German and English).

Network activities

ECC Netherlands was represented at the ECC meetings in Brussels, the Cooperation Day in Paris and several study visits to other ECCs.

ECC Netherlands further intensified its contacts with the Dutch Consumer Authority in 2008.

The centre also participated in the network day organised by the Representation of the European Commission in the Netherlands and had meetings with the press, Europe Direct and other organisations.

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NORWAY

2008 was the third year of ECC Norway. From the start, there has been increasing interest in the service, both from Norwegian consumers shopping in other European countries and from European citizens discovering the Norwegian market.

Although ECC Norway handled a high number of consumer contacts, the staff were also involved in various promotional activities.

Events

In 2008 young consumers aged between 14 and 22 were targeted with a campaign on e-commerce. As many of them purchase a variety of goods (music, films, sports equipment, etc.) on the Internet, perhaps without knowing their rights, ECC Norway introduced a blog on its website (www.forbrukereuropa.no/blog). This new feature on the website was advertised by an information campaign with posters and wallet-sized cards giving tips on e-commerce which were sent to colleges all over the country.

ECC Norway ran a quiz on its website, where young people could test their knowledge of consumer rights and win an iPod. This kind of 'consumer education' is one of the strategic goals of ECC Norway.

At the end of the year ECC Norway arranged a seminar with the European Commission Delegation to Norway and Iceland in Oslo to discuss security of payments when purchasing on the Internet.

ECC Norway also participated in International Consumer Day on 15 March, printed information on issues concerning car imports and held a joint campaign day with the host organisation.

Promotional activities

ECC Norway published and distributed its 2007 Annual Report.

Brochures were distributed to foreigners visiting the Nordic countries, giving information on consumer rights in each individual country.

ECC Norway advertised in the 'Travel to Norway' tourist catalogue, which was distributed all over Europe.

Network activities

ECC Norway was involved in several joint activities with the Consumer Protection Cooperation Committee to combat the practices of various holiday clubs. It manned two stands at the national airport and met representatives of consumer organisations from different European countries and local authorities on Gran Canaria.

ECC Norway was involved in various activities to develop alternative out-of-court solutions. The centre was actively involved in a workshop with the Civil Aviation Authority, which is the Norwegian national enforcement body for air travel. Good cooperation will bring benefits for consumers lodging complaints against airlines.

ADR/complaints

During 2008 ECC Norway recorded 1 381 requests from consumers, which is an increase of 9 % compared with 2007. Of these 363 were requests for information, whereas the other 1 018 consumers needed legal assistance.

ECC Norway organised a seminar presenting the Norwegian ADR scheme. One of the participants was a representative of ECC Ireland, who presented a study of Ireland's ADR system⁶.

⁶ European Consumer Centre Ireland, 'The development of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in Ireland – An analysis of complaints, best practices and recommendations', 2008.

POLAND



ECC Poland continued to promote development of ADR in Poland, with a conference in November 2007 and a publication on the subject. It also cooperated with many organisations and networks to handle complaints. Several cases were reported to Polish organisations including the Trade Inspectorate, Consumer Ombudsman, Consumer Federation, Bank Arbitration Office, Civil Aviation Office, Electronic Communication Office and Insurance Ombudsman, Solvit and Finnet. ECC Poland also cooperated with the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection by providing information on infringements, collective redress and abusive clauses.

Events

On European Consumer Day, in cooperation with the European Commission Representation in Poland, ECC Poland organised an exhibition of Polish consumer campaigns in 2007. ECC Poland won the award for the best national consumer campaign with the 'Consumer after holidays' campaign which was presented in Brussels at the official celebration of European Consumer Day in March 2008.

ECC Poland played an active role in the 15th Polish European meetings, the biggest annual event organised by the Polish Robert Schuman Foundation. The centre promoted its activities by giving advice to consumers in Warsaw, taking part in the 'European parade' and distributing leaflets and other promotional material.

Promotional activities

ECC Poland published various brochures and leaflets promoting consumers' rights, including 'Travelling in Europe', 'About the European Consumer Centre', 'Shopping online', 'ADR' and the 2007 Annual Report. All these publications were distributed by the European Information Centre, Europe Direct and consumer organisations.

ECC Poland published 71 news articles and eight issues of its newsletter on its website. The website recorded 100 445 visitors and 502 353 hits.

ECC Poland developed good relations with the media, which resulted in 27 TV interviews, 21 radio interviews, 207 press articles and 70 Internet publications.

Network activities

ECC Poland hosted study visits from its counterparts in Austria, Bulgaria, the Netherlands and Norway and sent staff on study visits to ECC Greece and EEC Spain.

Joint projects

ECC Poland participated in three joint projects on 'E-commerce', 'Tourism' and 'Air passenger rights'.

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PORTUGAL

In 2008, ECC Portugal was reorganised, involving a change of management and some new staff. This required a period of adjustment by the new colleagues, but did not affect the handling of cases in response to several requests from the network.

Event

ECC Portugal participated in an event to promote consumer rights in the EU on World Consumer Rights Day, in collaboration with its host organisation (the Directorate-General for Consumers — DGC). On this occasion, information material was widely distributed by means of direct contacts with the public via desks in the entrance of shopping malls and hypermarkets. The centre collaborated actively with the DGC on fraud prevention on the Internet, culminating in April with dissemination of information and participation in a workshop.

Promotional activities

In 2008 ECC Portugal completely renewed its website and published it in three language versions (Portuguese, English and French). The site included a form for submitting requests for information and complaints. Publication of the newsletter in electronic format was resumed.

ECC Portugal produced a wide range of material (leaflets and brochures), providing consumers with up-to-date information on important topics such as distance sales, legalisation of imported cars in Portugal, timeshare, ADR and guarantees.

ADR/complaints

To develop alternative dispute resolution, ECC Portugal cooperated actively with the Directorate-General for Consumers in the preparatory work for a national centre for mediation and arbitration of conflicts in the territory not covered by the existing arbitration centres. It also evaluated the application for ADR registration from the autonomous region of Madeira.

There was an increase in the volume of complaints from consumers, which could be a sign of higher demand for the assistance provided by the Portuguese centre.

ROMANIA



The European Consumer Centre in Romania started its activities in January 2008. Its official opening was held on 5 February at the European Commission Representation in the presence of Commissioner Kuneva and the President of the National Authority for Consumer Protection Mr Dan Vlaicu. The event was extensively covered in the media, as it was attended by representatives of 14 national newspapers and magazines, 3 news agencies, 6 radio stations and 12 television channels (one of which transmitted the event live).

On the same occasion ECC Romania also launched its website www.eccromania.ro, which has received 8 532 visitors since February 2008, with 6 596 single visits and 26 431 page visits.

ECC Romania's main activity – handling consumer complaints – started in February.

Events

In March ECC Romania participated in the European and national celebrations of Consumer Day and International Consumer Day. It organised the national selection panel to choose the best consumer information campaign in Romania in 2007. The centre organised three workshops in different high schools and two in the Economic Sciences Academy in Bucharest.

Promotional activities

ECC Romania promoted its services for consumers by participating in different TV and radio shows with national coverage and by issuing press releases. The contacts between the host organisation and one of the leading Romanian newspapers gave the centre free advertisements in the newspaper starting in July 2008.

ECC Romania also signed an agreement with the National Authority for Consumer Protection, opening up the possibility to use its local offices as entry points for complaints and as dissemination points for information.

ECC Romania distributed six electronic information sheets in Romanian and English, covering distance selling and unfair commercial practices (February 2008), e-commerce (March 2008), consumer credit (March 2008), air passenger rights (April 2008), ADR/mediation (April 2008), consumer sales and associated guarantees (September 2008). It also produced an electronic information sheet in Romanian on the general rights of consumers (January 2008). In cooperation with ECC Hungary, ECC Romania produced another electronic information sheet on rights of consumers purchasing goods in Romania and Hungary with a printed version in English.

Network activities

The centre established contacts with Romanian flight operators and concluded agreements with the Romanian NEB and one of the operators, in order to find faster solutions to complaints from consumers regarding passenger rights.

ECC Romania participated in two joint ECC-Net projects by preparing the material for the 'Tourism' and 'Shopping in Europe' projects.

ADR/complaints

ECC Romania started discussions with the relevant ministry on notification to the European Commission of the mediation service organised by the National Authority for Communications and Information Technology. By the end of 2008, this body had filled in the application form for designation as an ADR body under Commission Recommendation 98/257.

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SLOVAKIA

A special highlight of the work of ECC Slovakia was the boost given to its status by the amendment to the Consumer Protection Act stipulating that traders are under an obligation to collaborate with ECC Slovakia to handle cross-border consumer complaints.

Events

To discuss the rising number of consumer disputes with airlines based in Slovakia, ECC Slovakia organised a meeting with the Slovak Trade Inspectorate, in its capacity as the national enforcement body in this field, along with the Ministry of Transport, Post and Telecommunication and representatives of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. They decided that problematic complaints against airlines would be handled by the Slovak Trade Inspectorate.

ECC Slovakia organised the competition to select the best consumer campaign in 2008 in Slovakia.

Promotional activities

Following the competition for the best consumer campaign and European Consumer Day, the centre organised a press conference, which was well attended and stirred considerable interest in the activities of the centre. ECC Slovakia, its activities and cross-border consumer protection issues were also presented via articles in printed media, various websites, discussions with journalists by phone, online, on the radio or on television and, of course, via the centre's webpages. Altogether, approximately 24 media items appeared in 2008.

The following publications were prepared in 2008: the leaflet 'Visiting Slovakia', a leaflet for Slovakian tourists visiting popular foreign destinations and the 2007 Annual Report.

Network activities

As part of the joint project on 'Tourism in Europe', ECC Slovakia produced the following publications, which have been uploaded onto CIRCA and the relevant webpages: 'Driving in Slovakia', 'Travelling by boat', 'Health abroad', 'Vacation rental' and 'Travelling by plane'.

To help make consumers more aware of their rights and options in the event of claims and disputes concerning products and services purchased in other EU countries, Norway and Iceland, ECC Slovakia organised an information campaign in cooperation with Tesco and Polus City shopping centre.

Besides cooperation with representatives of public bodies, the European Commission and other members of ECC-Net, ECC Slovakia also cooperated with NGOs and prepared a two-day seminar on complaints where participants received a hand-out package of templates and examples of complaints.

SLOVENIA



In the first part of the year the activities of the centre were related to Slovenia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. In March ECC Slovenia celebrated European Consumer Day. On 15 March the centre manned a stand at Ljubljana central market. In cooperation with the Consumer Protection Office of the Republic of Slovenia, the centre organised a round table on ADR. All these events were attended by Commissioner Kuneva and the Minister of Economic Affairs, Mr Vizjak.

Events

In May ECC Slovenia organised an international conference entitled 'Alternative consumer dispute resolution: The proposed ADR mechanism in Slovenia and the experience of ECC-Net'. The event was attended by over 50 participants from 13 EU Member States and Norway. The Slovene participants included representatives of consumer organisations, traders, representatives of the public authorities and other bodies.

Promotional activities

All through the year different promotional activities were carried out. ECC Slovenia held seven workshops for consumers and organised more than ten stands in different places all over Slovenia. It developed closer cooperation with national TV and radio stations and participated in different radio and TV shows.

ECC Slovenia also published three new educational publications, including the leaflet 'Shopping Online' aiming at helping Slovene consumers who shop online in other EU Member States.

The 'Slovene Traditional Foods' brochure explains the special marks on foodstuffs in Slovenia, namely protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indication (PGI) and guaranteed traditional speciality (GTS). The publication also includes information on national and EU protected marks. The brochure is available in Slovenian and English.

ECC Slovenia prepared the leaflet 'Opening a bank account in Slovenia for citizens of other EU Member States' which was published in English.

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SPAIN

ECC Spain's main activity is case-handling and the centre focused on providing assistance in response to complaints from consumers.

Events

ECC Spain was represented at different meetings, events and workshops on consumer protection, notably:

- a course on telematic offices and case-handling, held in Málaga in February, to explain how telematic offices work and how ECC Spain deals with cases. This was attended by representatives from consumer and tourism offices in Andalusia;
- several meetings with Iberia, Spanair and the Civil Aviation Authority on complaints about air passenger rights;
- a presentation about the link between consumer protection and the quality of tourism services at the 'Tourism Quality is International' Round Table at FITUR 2008;
- a seminar on responsible consumption, on European Consumer Day, where ECC Spain provided tips on responsible consumption, hotel bookings and car rental;
- a seminar on consumer and tourism protection, where an adviser from ECC Spain presented the conclusions of the Conference 'Quality is Profitable: Leisure Tourism and Consumer Protection in the Mediterranean';
- a seminar on e-commerce and consumer protection, held in Cyprus, where ECC Spain gave a presentation on cross-border consumer protection in the context of e-commerce;
- a national meeting of the security industry in Spain.

Promotional activities

ECC Spain promoted ECC-Net via various channels, in mass media, workshops, seminars and conferences. As part of the centre's functions, several meetings were held with the business sector to strengthen relations and collaboration with traders.

Network activities

ECC Netherlands, Finland, Poland, Sweden and Germany paid study visits to ECC Spain. Two advisers from ECC Spain made a study visit to ECC UK.

ECC Spain collaborated in the joint project on holiday clubs in Andalusia and the Canary Islands and organised and participated in the seminars in Málaga and Gran Canaria.

SWEDEN



In 2008, ECC Sweden gave priority to activities on air passenger rights and e-commerce.

Events

ECC Sweden organised a workshop on air passenger rights, which was attended by thirteen ECCs, five national enforcement bodies (NEB), the Swedish National Board for Consumer Complaints (ADR), one air carrier and representatives from the European Commission. The purpose was to exchange experience and best practice on case-handling and application of Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 and on the role of the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) body and to improve the cooperation between ECC-Net and the NEBs. A report on the presentations and discussions at the workshop was distributed to all ECCs.

ECC Sweden participated in the 'Surf Calm' campaign. A televised panel debate was held on Internet security and secure e-commerce plus a number of open information meetings. Information on consumer rights in this area was given to local consumer advisers and students at several events and to consumers at four open meetings.

Promotional activities

A total of five press releases and 46 news articles were published on the website resulting in 957 announcements in newspapers and on television or radio. The website received 88 000 visits and 20 % of them were by international visitors. A complaints guide was launched, including letter templates in Swedish, English and German. It was presented in a press release and reported on in several newspapers.

New leaflets were produced and a supplement from ECC Sweden was distributed in the largest Swedish consumer magazine 'Råd & Rön' and on its website.

Approximately 25 000 leaflets on timeshare/holiday clubs were distributed to tour operators in the Canary Islands for direct distribution to consumers.

Network activities

ECC Sweden attended ECC-Net meetings and conferences and arranged study visits to and exchanges with ECC Austria, Spain, Luxembourg and Italy.

Comments were submitted on proposals for legislation on housing and car issues, the Services Directive and the Directive on Consumer Rights. The government asked the National Board of Trade, the Swedish Consumer Agency and the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth to set up points of single contact provided for by the Services Directive. ECC Sweden is participating in this working group.

In December ECC Sweden, together with the Consumer Agency, started cooperation with Generation Europe, with a view to reviewing facts and disseminating the 2009-2010 Europa Diary and the Teacher's Guide.

ADR/complaints

On ADR, ECC Sweden continued its cooperation with the Swedish National Board for Consumer Complaints and participated in the Baltic Sea Seminar.

Approximately 3 200 consumers, consumer advisers and organisations, etc. sought assistance or information from ECC Sweden. 28 % of the contacts were requests for information, while 71 % were complaints after a purchase. Under 1 % were disputes. The biggest problems were airlines and air passenger rights, which accounted for 18 % of all cases. Time-share and related products generated 8 % while motor vehicles, including repairs, made up 6 % of the enquiries.

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2008 was the first full year of operation for the UK European Consumer Centre under its new host organisation, the Trading Standards Institute. During 2008 ECC UK built upon the achievements of the previous year and expanded its activities.

In order to get the message out to the general public, the staff of the centre attended various events across the UK to provide information and advice to consumers and information to other consumer organisations.

One of the highlights in 2008 was taking part in the Best Consumer Campaign competition organised by the European Commission to celebrate and promote European Consumer Day. ECC UK selected the best consumer campaign from the UK – the Consumer Challenge Quiz, which was created to help turn young people with learning difficulties into informed and confident consumers. The selection panel recognised the Consumer Challenge Quiz as the most original campaign amongst the entries.

Events

To celebrate European Consumer Day, ECC UK organised a stand at Ebbsfleet international railway station, where leaflets were distributed to travellers bound for or returning from the continent.

Promotional activities

In collaboration with Doncaster Trading Standards, ECC UK held an information day at Robin Hood airport in Doncaster. Passengers going away on their holidays received information and advice on their rights when buying goods abroad.

Network activities

The centre manned a stand at the Consumer Affairs and Trading Standards Conference and Exhibition, where people could ask questions about their consumers' rights. In addition, a mini theatre session was organised where the centre manager provided further information on the centre and ECC-Net.

European Commission

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