

TRAVEL SECTOR CRISIS MINISTERS DO NOT WEAKEN CONSUMER RIGHTS

Ahead of this week's video-conference meeting of EU Tourism and Transport Ministers Euroconsumers is calling for coordinated measures to tackle the on-going travel sector crisis. A solution needs to be found for both consumers and business. The COVID-19 crisis should not be used to diminish consumers' rights. Restoring consumer trust in the Single Market is essential for the recovery of all European economies.

Brussels, 27th April - Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, Euroconsumers' members in Belgium, Italy, Spain and Portugal have been coping with a dramatic increase in consumer complaints about travel and flight cancellations.

*"European legislation is quite clear: European travelers **can claim a full reimbursement if their travel** or flight is cancelled due to extraordinary circumstances such as the current COVID-19 crisis. This has also been repeatedly confirmed not only by the European Commission's updated guidelines on passenger rights and package travel Directive, but also by the European commissioners for Justice, Transport and Internal Market,"* Els Bruggeman, Head of Policy and Enforcement at Euroconsumers.

Nonetheless, thousands of airline companies and travel agencies are forcing consumers to accept vouchers rather than reimbursement. Additionally, these vouchers are often issued without binding guarantees that consumers will ever be able to use them. More alarmingly, many Member States have recently adopted emergency measures that not only differ from country to country, but also often contradict the above-mentioned EU legislation.

Recent legislation in Euroconsumers' member countries perfectly illustrates this:

- **Belgium:** Recent Belgian legislation forces consumers whose package travel has been cancelled to accept vouchers rather than reimbursement. These are valid for one year and are protected against insolvency. If a voucher is not used within the year, consumers can still apply for reimbursement.
- **Italy:** According to new decrees, transport companies, travel agencies and hotels can decide whether to reimburse or to issue vouchers, leaving consumers fully dependent on the companies' decisions. These vouchers are not covered in the event of bankruptcy. .
- **Spain:** Consumers can still choose reimbursement over vouchers with regards to flight cancellations. However, with cancelled travel packages, consumers will need to accept a voucher (valid for one year and reimbursable) for the part the company was unable to retrieve from its service providers. Only package travel vouchers are said to be solvency protected.
- **Portugal:** In the case of a package tour cancellation, consumers have the choice between rescheduling or accepting a voucher valid until 31st December 2021 that is refundable when not used and insolvency protected. .

Euroconsumers is conscious of the vast difficulties with which the travel sector is currently confronted. However, consumers are also suffering. Our recent [report](#) showed that households have already lost billions as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. **This pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to threaten or weaken consumer rights. Restoring consumer trust in the Single Market is essential for the recovery of all European economies.**

Ahead of this week's meeting, Euroconsumers calls on Ministers to **adopt a coordinated plan** to ensure that both consumers and business can cope with the difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. Travel and other companies must respect the consumer's right to claim reimbursement and need to get the necessary liquidity to secure this. It is essential that any **emergency measures and state aid** granted to the tourism industry be used to enable businesses to repay consumers impacted.

'In order to show solidarity with the travel sector, Euroconsumers is ready to call on consumers to accept vouchers voluntarily, provided these are insolvency protected, flexible, and automatically reimbursed if unused at the end of the validity period. If these conditions are met, they can be an attractive alternative for consumers and a helpful tool for the travel sector at the same time. We are fully aware that consumer choices are key to the economic recovery in the travel sector. As responsible consumer organisations we are therefore ready to do our part to rebuild a solid economy that should be futureproof, sustainable and consumer friendly' **Marco Pierani, Director of Public Affairs, at Euroconsumers**

Gathering five national consumer organisations and giving voice to a total of more than 1.5 million people, Euroconsumers is the world's leading consumer cluster in innovative information, personalised services and defence of consumer's rights. Our organisations work together and also with BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation, and Consumers International to ensure consumers are safe, that markets are fair and benefit from honest relations with businesses and authorities.

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