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**ECU General Assembly
Speech by
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European Economic and Social Committee & EU consumer policy

Good morning to everybody, I am happy to be with you. First for transparency I think it is important to tell you the different job roles that at this moment I am covering in the interest of consumers. I am General Secretary of the national Italian consumer association Movimento Consumatori. I am a European Social and Economic Committee member since October 2020. I was appointed by the Italian National Consumer and Users Council (CNCU) to represent all the Italian consumer associations. And last but not least Movimento Consumatori is a ECU member.

I would specify, even if it is obvious that my statement does not bind or represent the thought of the EESC or the CNCU but only my thought.

I state that it is clear that as EESC we are at the disposal of all consumer associations across Europe to help them make their voices and opinions heard on draft directives and draft regulations. It is equally clear that the undersigned is also available to ECU and its member organizations. I would like you to consider me available. I would like us to find a way to organize ourselves. I'm available. For example, I could send you the main dossiers subject

to analysis by the EESC with respect to consumer issues and in particular the Consumer Agenda. We could create informal study groups that support and influence my business and that of other members of the consumer category. The best would be if each ECU member could try to adopt a specific strategy dedicated to how to increase its ability to actively participate in regulatory lobbying. We should organize ourselves, dividing sectors in order to create economies of scale. also take this opportunity to ask you if you are on good terms with the EESC member who represents all consumer NGO organizations in your country. We need to network and team up. We must identify priorities for action in the knowledge that we will not be able to tackle everything. Probably, in the absence of specific European resources, we must find national projects to step up this strategic work, let's talk about it! The theme, therefore, is the European and national consumer associations. What strategies can be adopted in order to effectively influence the legislator? We need a specific strategy that allows us to participate in this massive standardization process, and we mustn't make the mistake of thinking we don't need it. In the light of what we have heard about the new Consumer Agenda, today, more than anything else, I would like to

reason with all of you on what I believe is the first priority: to equip European consumer associations with the tools and structures necessary for an effective lobbying aimed at the evolution of the rule of law and the economic and social inclusion of consumers. A system measure is required. This is the premise, the prerequisite for the implementation of the European Commission's Agenda as it was conceived.

Indeed, the European Commission identifies a holistic approach for a renewed governance of consumer policy based on closer cooperation between actions at EU and national level as well as with stakeholders as one of the hallmarks of the new agenda. I think abstractly we all agree. But let's stop for a moment to think. The Agenda assumes that consumer organizations manage to be part of governance. The European Commission assumes that consumer associations are able to participate. But is it really so? Does it correspond to reality?

To date, the vast majority of national consumer associations have participated in European legislative processes only and almost exclusively with respect to the downward phase of transposition of European consumer policies into national legislation. In some countries, participation is a real added value, in others it is little

more than a legal fiction. But as national associations we are witnessing in recent years a strong increase in the request for participation from the EC, even in the ascending phase. And, therefore, we understand, reading the new Agenda that it is the Commission's intention to further aim at strengthening cooperation. The creation of a new Advisory Group is proof of this. Well, I don't have the data on how the public consultations of the European Commission have gone over the last two years at the level of participation, but I think I'm not wrong to say that without investments and a strategy that is also public and not only associative, the Commission will not be able to involve associations. Associations that are engaged on a daily basis in information, education, consultancy and extrajudicial assistance online and in the territory. Associations that are absorbed by an intense dialogue with the institutions and national supervisory authorities (eg. telecommunications, Antitrust, privacy, Energy, etc.). Associations, therefore, which, unlike the European ones, have the scenario and the national level as their primary objective and are not structured to respond directly to the consultations launched directly by the Commission on an increasingly frequent basis. Associations, therefore, which unlike the European ones

have the scenario and the national level as their primary objective and are not structured to respond on a monthly basis to the inputs launched directly by the Commission.

As the processes of European legislative creation are structured today, the participation of civil society and intermediate bodies is fundamental. Without this participation these "processes" are emptied and become "sterile" rites. Well, without specific investments, this will be the scenario. And not only that. already today it is clear that there is a large gap in the representativeness of the interests of consumers on the part of civil society, even at the European level. Do we think we can start a new governance based on cooperation with these assumptions? First we need to invest in consumer associations in my opinion, for example within the new European Pillar for social rights and then we can set up strategies that provide for a strong involvement of associations. But let us immediately ask ourselves to invest in both the most representative national associations and the European ones? Do we have sufficient resources and ideas? I would like to be extremely clear on this. I am sure that without a specific strategic plan aimed at allowing consumer associations the possibility of involving and remunerating consultants and experts you will

create a mere fiction. Well, even if the European Commission understands and shares what I am highlighting, I do not think that there will be sufficient resources and therefore, having to choose, I think it is a priority that at European level we take on the responsibility of growing European associations, while compared to those national plans, the EC should demand from the member countries specific national plans that update and enhance the possibility of dialogue with organized civil society in legislative processes at least in the downward phase. Without a specific plan, organized civil society will not be able to express itself. A few dozen managers of national consumer associations will participate in a couple of annual meetings, perhaps some seminars at European level, but we will not have created a European model that guarantees constant and effective dialogue with organized associations. At the same time, in my opinion, there should be a strong revision of the composition of the European Economic and Social Committee which was born in 1957, a historical period in which the great social opposition saw entrepreneurs on the one hand and workers on the other. Today we are in 2021. And it is clear that dialogue with the EESC is not enough for the EC. Yet it is strange. The EESC was set up precisely to act as a bridge between

the European institutions and civil society. And why if the EC believes in the importance of dialogue and cooperation with consumer associations allows within the EESC only 15 members out of 329 to represent consumer associations?

Will 15 members be able to examine and contribute effectively with views and opinions on all the huge legislative production that awaits us? At this point it seems clear to me that it is necessary to review the composition of the EESC by changing the composition of the national delegations where at best we have only one consumer representative for each delegation (the most numerous like the Italian one are made up of 24 members). In conclusion, the current situation of consumer representation sees a national level that is unable to follow the current European regulatory turbo production, especially in ascending bands. A European level which, although presided over by a historical European association, would need other reinforcements that would guarantee real pluralism in the representation of the interests of consumers from all member states. A European institutional level that in the EESC, a place specifically dedicated to allowing civil society to express itself on the main European legislative interventions to influence them

above all from a social angle, in which, despite the fact that European consumers are 445 million, less than 5% of members is called to represent them to expressly protect their interests and rights. I hope that the question is clear at this point in the reflection. We would like to know where the EC intends to 'put its hand' to solve this problem from the ground up, creating the conditions for making the regulatory decision-making process more democratic. Let's hurry up or the accusations that it's all and just an expensive formal and technocratic staged mess won't be long in coming.

We know that's not the case and that the democratization of legislative process is not a easy, obvious goal but we have a duty to work and ask it to be achieved as soon as possible. I hope that this will be the contribution that the UE will make to the world to overturn the balance of power with non-democratic private or public powers. We have to do it! We can do it! Good job!