

Results of the initial workshop

Migrants and Consumer Protection in Digital Markets 14.03.2014

The initial workshop of the project “Migrants and Consumer Protection in Digital Markets” was conducted in the premises of the Migration Council of Berlin Brandenburg on March 14th 2014. With 55 participants, the event was well-attended. Participants were representatives of the Federation and the State of Berlin, consumer rights speakers of the Berlin House of Representatives, representatives of Consumer Advice Centers and migrant organizations and social counseling services and youth organizations. In total, 17 migrant organizations were represented at the initial workshop.

In his opening speech, Gerd Billen, State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection, mentioned two reasons for conducting the initial workshop: one being the objective of equality of opportunity for migrants in the digital world, the other being the World Consumer Rights Day on March 15th. Billen pointed out the basic rights of consumers who had already been proclaimed by John F. Kennedy in the early 1960's. These rights are valid for all consumers - regardless of their origin. Gerd Billen summarily reflected on shortcomings in digital markets such as cyberbullying, privacy in social networks, a lack of transparency in cellular communication deals and mentioned the “button solution” as a particular success of consumer protection.

Eva Bell, director of the Berlin Consumer Advice Center, discussed new initiatives and approaches to consumer protection in an immigration society in her speech. She described the previous approaches of Consumer Advice Centers and existing advisory services of the Berlin Consumer Advice Center for the Turkish and Russian-speaking target group and made it clear that on-site consultation with interpreters in municipalities with a high migration density is not economical. Currently, this form of advice is present in Marzahn and Lichtenberg. This is extended by the “Mentor Training for Target Group-Oriented” Consumer Protection “. Eva Bell named subscription traps, revocation options for various contracts and telecommunications as issues of focus. In addition, Bell spoke about the increased use of home deals in the telecommunications sector for migrants and their excessive smartphone bills.

Eva Bell identified the goal of the project as developing topic relevant consumer information from the inputs of the workshops and the results of market checks. Finally, she presented the project team: Dr. Çiçek Bacik, Ünal Zeran, Metin Öztürk Tarkan and Ekaterina Quehl.

A keynote speech by Irene Köhne, Consumer Policy Spokesperson of the SPD parliamentary group of the Berlin House of Representatives, introduced the importance of migrants in Consumer Policy to a panel discussion with members of the House of Representatives. Köhne pointed out that migrants are a diverse group and that consumer behavior differs depending on age, ethnicity, cultural differences and language barriers. She pleaded for the creation of a

nationwide database in which the consumer behavior of different target groups can be recorded more accurately in order to respond to their specific needs more precisely.

Podium discussion

Also participating in the podium discussion were Claudio Jupe, Consumer Policy Spokesperson of the CDU parliamentary group, Dr. Turgut Altuğ, Spokesperson for Environmental and Consumer Protection of the Bündnis90/Die Grünen parliamentary group, Dr. Klaus Lederer, Consumer Affairs Spokesperson for The Left parliamentary group and Fabio Reinhardt, Spokesperson for Integration of the Pirate Party parliamentary group and Chairman of the Committee on Digital Management, Data Protection and Freedom of Information in the Berlin House of Representatives. The participants of the podium discussion were in agreement that the topic “Migrants and Consumer Protection in Digital markets” required intensive research - if possible with scientific support - and that this was difficult to implement due to lack of resources. All participants of the podium calling for stronger consumer education of migrants in the digital markets and reaffirmed that the services in this area had to be expanded.

Irene Köhne underlined the importance of volunteer work in consumer education. Köhne emphasized that the removal of existing barriers in the consumer advice of migrants was important. The consumer education of migrants should be based on two pillars: Firstly multipliers should take the consumer information into the communities and, secondly, the outreach of consumer protection should be extended. Claudio Jupe supported Köhne’s view that the voluntary commitment to develop consumer awareness plays an important role. He stressed that financial resources for consumer advice centers had been increased in the past few years. Additional funds were difficult to enforce, given the debt of the Berlin budget. His conclusion was: “Education, research, money”.

The deputy of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (The Greens), Turgut Altuğ, spoke of the need to involve migrant organizations in the dissemination of information. Altuğ reported on the applications already made by his parliamentary group for consumer education. Altuğ took the view that the education of migrants as consumers is not only a social problem, and that the companies should also be called upon for education.

Klaus Lederer recommended to merge all the resources in this field (and not only from Hamburg, Berlin and Bremen) in order to exploit synergies for other target groups afterwards. He emphasized the need for additional financial resources for such projects and was convinced that these resources are to be found both the federal government as well as the state.

Fabio Reinhardt of the Pirate Party urged first of all to find out what advisory needs migrants have as regards content. He supported the proposal of a research database and referred to the Diversity Monitor, made and used in Vienna.

Reaction from the audience to the podium discussion

Mustafa Doğanay, spokesman for the Turkish Union in Berlin-Brandenburg and Workers' Welfare Federal Association worker, explained that he had only a part-time position as a Workers' Welfare Federal Association worker. Associations and counseling centers lacked both the time and the staff to conduct counseling of migrants on specific topics. He criticized the political representatives for putting such an important task as the consumer education of migrants on the shoulders of volunteers.

Beata Waldek, Work and Life, DGB/VHS, also referred to the lack of capacity of the associations, which are active in giving advice. She emphasized that the DGB/VHS offers a total of 4 counseling centers in Berlin in 10 languages. Waldek spoke in favor of expanding the services of counseling centers. But as there is a shortage of staff in social counseling centers everywhere, consumer education should be located primarily at the Consumer Advice Centers.

Dr. Hans Willi Weizen, Head of Division at the Senate Department for Justice and Consumer Protection, pointed out that the annual subsidy amount for Consumer Protection in Berlin has been increased in recent years after a drastic cut in 2004.

Results from the workshop

Questions in the three workshops:

Internet/Radio and Television, Data Protection and Mobile Communication and the Fixed-Line Network:

1. What main problems do migrants have from the point of view of consumer rights?
2. What important potential solutions could there be?
3. How can consumer information be brought to the target groups?

"Internet/Radio and Television" Workshop

Eight participants took part in this workshop. The complexity of general terms and conditions and elusive conditions of use in online trading were regarded by the participants as main problems for migrants. Due to lack of representation in public service television and radio stations, migrants have switched to stations of their former homeland. The main problem was seen as a lack of lines of communication over which information which is already available can be transported to the target group. The participants suggested the following solutions: varied offerings and more diversity in the mass media as well as stricter controls with safety checks and certification of enterprises (according to consumer friendliness), introduction of "market guardians" and consumer-friendly laws. From the perspective of the participants, consumer information can be taken directly to these target groups via associations, religious institutions, and (digital) media and social networks.

"Data Protection" Workshop

Five participants attended this workshop. The main problems relating to data protection in digital markets among migrants were seen as a more carefree handling of private data and the lack of knowledge of the misuse of personal data on the Internet. The solutions to such problems range from the introduction of consumer protection as a school subject up to the creation of easily-understandable, visually-appealing topic-specific materials. The use of migrant-specific mass media has been proposed as a means of communication. Furthermore, the Data Protection Commissioners of the federal states should be made aware of the project.

“Mobile Communication and the Fixed-Line Network” Workshop

The workshop was attended by 14 participants. The problems described by the participants can be categorized into three groups: contractual problems, informational deficits and access barriers. As possible solutions of the categorized problems, the participants suggested a simplification of the terms and conditions, cooperation with immigrant organizations and prevention in schools. Consumer information should also be communicated to all generations: While the first generation must be informed by mouth, internet texts with additional information in the mother tongue are enough for the second and third generation. The fourth generation will manage with translated specimen letters. General education on its own is no solution, since academics are also affected by the problems in the area of mobile communication and fixed-line networks. Claudio Jupe supported Köhne’s view that the voluntary commitment to develop consumer awareness plays an important role. He stressed that financial resources for consumer advice centers had been increased in the past few years. Additional funds were difficult to enforce, given the debt of the Berlin budget. His conclusion was: “Education, research, money”.

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