The ECOS Annual Conference 2022 discussed how to make the proposed Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) a success. The conference opened with remarks from ECOS Executive Director, Justin Wilkes, followed by a keynote speech by Aurel Ciobanu-Dordea, Director, Circular Economy at DG Environment, and a panel discussion, bringing together representatives from industry, the European Parliament, the Swedish Energy Agency and ECOS.

**Keynote speech**

**Aurel Ciobanu-Dordea**

Director, Circular Economy, DG Environment, European Commission

Mr Aurel Ciobanu-Dordea welcomed the event, acknowledging ECOS as a longstanding partner providing high-quality expertise and working with the European Commission to implement strong environmental principles.

‘The Sustainable Products Initiative impact assessment is clear’, he said, ‘today’s consumption and production patterns are not sustainable’. We are exceeding planetary boundaries and are outside the safe operating space for humanity. This is why the European Commission proposed ESPR, which seeks to build on the existing successes of ecodesign and expand them. In parallel to the legislative procedure, work must commence on adapting existing standards and creating new ones to ensure the success of the regulation.

**Panel Discussion**

**Christel Delberghe**, Director General, Eurocommerce • **Carlos Lopes**, Project leader, Swedish Energy Agency • **Sara Matthieu**, Member of the European Parliament, Greens/EFA • **Ioana Popescu**, Senior Programme Manager, ECOS

The panel discussion focused on what was needed to make the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation a success.

**Christel Delberghe**, Director General at Eurocommerce, stressed that sustainability is imperative. Eurocommerce supports the approach and the goal of the ESPR. She stressed the importance of prioritising the areas that will have the biggest impact. Ms Delberghe pointed to positive trends, such as retailers investing in second-hand shops and models for leasing, rather than ownership. However, she also stressed that it is key to work on the consumer mindset, especially on areas such as repairability.

**Ioana Popescu**, Senior Programme Manager at ECOS, pointed out that 28 July 2022 marks Earth Overshoot Day – the day when we will have used all the biological resources that Earth regenerates during the entire year. She highlighted that sustainable products are those that enable a non toxic, circular and regenerative economy. She
praised the potential of the Regulation, which includes promising aspects such as minimum requirements to solve sustainability issues of current products, as well as Digital Product Passports (DPPs). However, Ms Popescu pointed to certain limitations, for example the fact that such polluting sectors as cement and packaging are not included in the scope of the ESPR.

Carlos Lopes, Project Leader of the Swedish Energy Agency, argued that EU Member States must support work on requirements and engage with this work. Mr Lopes stressed that while labelling requirements can help consumers make informed decisions, they will not be enough. Supporting measures, including taxes and levies, will be needed. He pointed out that with more products coming under ecodesign, the methodology to create requirements is critical and will vary from product to product.

MEP Sara Matthieu told the audience that ecodesign is the cornerstone of the European Green Deal. As shadow rapporteur for the file, she hoped it would get the attention it deserved. She pointed out that there is a need to transform business models. ‘Carrot’ methods – like subsidising insulation of homes – are all well and good, but often only wealthy people can afford environmentally-friendly products. This needs to be addressed. Similarly, she suggested that social indicators should be included in the legislation, arguing they are ‘inherently linked’ to environmental considerations.

Panel take-aways:
• Christel Delberghe: pragmatism and prioritisation are key
• Ioana Popescu: ambition must be kept and materialised in the work programme
• Carlos Lopes: to make the ESPR a success, much more resources are needed
• Sara Matthieu: including clear targets and indicators in the Regulation is critical

Why do we need to make sustainable products the norm?

Without policy intervention, by 2050 the world’s population is expected to be consuming resources at a rate three times higher than the Earth can regenerate. Up to 80% of the environmental impact of products is determined at the design phase, yet the linear pattern of ‘take-make-use-dispose’ does not provide producers with sufficient incentives to make their products more circular. Many products break down too quickly, cannot be easily reused, repaired or recycled, or, worse still, are made for a single use only.

The ESPR is set to be a game-changer. In contrast to traditional circular economy measures that focus on the end-of-life phase - such as returning products to the supply chain instead of landfill - the ESPR aims at building in sustainability throughout the entire product lifecycle, starting at the design phase. By doing so, it also seeks to unlock the potential of circular business models and more sustainable consumption.

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