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Speech by

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|| 8.ª UN Conference to Review all Aspects of the Set of Multilaterally Agreed Equitable Principles and Rules for the Control of Restrictive Business Practices | High-level segment: «Leaving no one behind in the post COVID-19 world: the contribution of competition and consumer policies»

Good afternoon,

It is with great honor that I address this conference. I would like to thank the Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Dr. Mukhisa Kituyi, for the invitation to attend this important event, and for the opportunity to address this topic, which, surely, has great relevance to our common path ahead.

I would also like to greet the distinguished members of this panel and everyone who's watching us today.

Fulfilling the challenge that has been given to me, I would like to speak, at length, about the measures adopted by the Portuguese Government to tackle the consequences of the epidemiological situation caused by COVID-19 disease.

The Portuguese Government has been very attentive to the needs of consumers since the beginning of the pandemic and has always sought to be in line with the European Union legal framework.

Now that we face a second wave, it is time to display that Governments are focused on not leaving anyone behind, especially the most vulnerable, the elderly, and those who, due to the effects of the pandemic, have suffered a loss of income or are unemployed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented health emergency over the world and it has brought consequences for consumers' daily lives and has affected all of us in different areas. The virus has fundamentally changed the world as we know it, in a matter of weeks. Our citizens live, buy, and think differently in many ways. A more restrictive lifestyle has prompted consumers to change their behavior as a response to the current situation. Their priorities changed. They have become centered on the most basic needs, while non-essential categories have fallen steeply.

During the restrictive period of confinement, people mostly worked from home using different digital tools. COVID-19 has broadly accelerated digital transformation in the space of mere



weeks. Digital commerce has also increased as consumers migrate online. Without a doubt, digitalization has brought many new opportunities and benefits to consumers.

Therefore, considering the impact of the pandemic on the economy, the Portuguese Government adopted a transversal approach to protect consumer rights and maintain the existing level of protection. In this context, it's possible to emphasize the following measures:

Big support for the liquidity of households/consumers by granting them a moratorium on house loans and some consumer loans, until September 2021. With this measure, we could avoid situations of non-compliance derived from increasing unemployment.

Prohibition of the suspension or interruption of the supply of essential services, such as water, electricity, natural gas, and electronic communications, to unemployed consumers, or those who have had a sharp decrease in income or are infected by COVID-19.

In the banking sector, we suspended the charge on commissions related to payment transactions through digital channels, namely in homebanking or payment applications.

In the cultural, air transport, and travel sectors, specific consumers' protection measures have been adopted, through the provision of specific rights in case of cancellation or rescheduling of cultural events or trips.

Reinforcement of consumer rights, and guarantees, related to consumer goods, by extending the period of notification of non-conformities in goods purchased by consumers, ensuring them the effective exercise of their rights regarding non-conformities that have been detected during the confinement imposed by COVID-19.

The imposition of limits on profit margins on the sale of biocides and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Creation of a Working Group with different stakeholders to monitor the supply of the food chain, the prices, and to ensure that essential goods were not lacking during the most critical periods.

Reinforcement of inspection activities, since the beginning of the pandemic, to check the conformity and safety of the PPE's and biocides available on the market. These initiatives were fundamental to give consumers confidence, and trust, and to guarantee compliance with the rules that protect us collectively.

Attentive vigilance of misleading advertising practices, particularly regarding the promotion of COVID-19 curing products or services, or even regarding advertising about cleaning products, disinfectants, or masks that could be false or misleading, claiming characteristics that were not verified. In this context, we reinforced the advice for consumers to buy medicines only on authorized websites, such as pharmacy pages.

Finally, it is important to note that the Portuguese Government has been making an effort to review and change, if necessary, some of the measures already implemented due to the ongoing evolution of the epidemiological situation, to safeguard consumer protection in a context as complex as the one we are living.

The new opportunities and challenges that COVID-19 brings us also generate new policy issues. For policymakers, the question arises as to how to protect consumers in the digital world and what concrete actions need to be taken.

Besides, it is becoming clear that economic and social progress are increasingly dependent on the steps we take towards sustainable consumption. While we could observe some remarkable improvements in the local environment because of lockdowns induced by COVID-19, we need a systemic change decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and applying a lifecycle thinking approach.

In terms of sustainable development, our future depends on our awareness of the importance of sustainable consumption. In this sense, it is very important to promote a sustainable lifestyle by a holistic approach to achieve one common goal - bring the Earth back to balance for a better future.

I don't have any doubts that, if we want to succeed in facing the challenges we are confronted with, it is crucial to strengthen international cooperation when adopting or reviewing consumer protection measures, allowing the effective implementation of legislation and consumer protection. The role of the UNCTAD and the other organizations as OECD, international cooperation networks - namely Iberoamerican Forum of Governmental Consumer Protection Agencies (FIAGC) and International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network (ICPEN) - is fundamental on this. From the first hour, we worked together sharing information and debating best practices to cooperate and find common answers.



Portugal, in the month when it will assume the “Pro tempore” Presidency of the FIAGC network, also organized an international conference to discuss the role of cooperation entities and networks in the field of consumer protection and the inherent challenges, both in the context of the pandemic and in post-pandemic. It is undeniable that only through cooperation, we can achieve global results for problems that concern us all.

We must ensure that actual and future policy puts the consumer at the center, ensuring a high level of protection and allowing networking to ensure compliance with consumer legislation - this aspect is particularly important to boost trust in the market so that consumers have full confidence when buying goods and services online.

The data economy should also continue to be highlighted, concerning the role of the consumer, implementing a human-centric vision, placing the individual as the legitimate owner of his data, and the data produced by him, guaranteeing his autonomy and power of decision regarding the use and purpose of these data.

In short, it is now time to assess what measures can be applied to boost consumer confidence in the market. We shall also reflect on how to foster more sustainable consumption, make consumers more conscious about health and the environmental aspects of their shopping choices, and protect their rights including their safety in the online environment without leaving no one behind.

Portugal takes over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2021, we will have a special mission in the development of the European Commission's New Consumer Agenda. We intend to play an active role and display a strong stance to guarantee a high level of consumer protection.

Those are some of our collective challenges. In an always evolving world, we need to create stability, confidence, and sustainability to enforce trust in the market.

Thank you very much. It was a huge pleasure to be here with you all today.