



Speech by Commissioner Breton at the European Parliament – Plenary session The Common Charger Strasbourg, 13th January 2020

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Briefing Note

Scene setter/Context of the meeting:

In 2009 the Commission facilitated a voluntary agreement on the common charger. This agreement came to an effective end in 2014. New negotiations started in 2014. In 2014 the new Radio Equipment Directive (RED) was adopted, which foresees an empowerment for the Commission to adopt delegated acts to ensure interoperability of electronic devices with common chargers. The EP has put pressure for the Commission to enact this empowerment.

For the last years, the Commission has put much effort to find consensus on a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The Commission received from the mobile phone manufacturers a new MoU, which was made public by DigitalEurope in March 2018.

The new MoU did not fulfil the desired policy objectives. As a result, the Commission launched a study to assess impacts of possible regulatory options, namely adoption of a delegated act pursuant Article 3(3)(a) of the Radio Equipment Directive 2014/53/EU (RED).

MEP [REDACTED] with the support of other EPP Members of the Parliament, namely [REDACTED] put forward an oral question to the Commission.

The text of the oral question is as follows:

1) When the Commission will present the results of impact assessment of the introduction of common chargers for mobile telephones and other compatible devices?

2) Using wireless charging technology has a potential to bring additional benefits. How does the Commission want to ensure interoperability of different wireless chargers with different mobile radio equipment?

3) Is Commission considering legislative initiatives in order to increase the amounts of cables and chargers recycled in the Member States?

4) How will Commission ensure that consumers don't have to buy new chargers with each new device and therefore can reduce their environmental footprint?

The three key messages:

1. The Commission has fostered a voluntary approach to implement a common charging solution for mobile phones, without hampering innovation. The voluntary approach brought significant improvements by impressively reducing the number of available charging solutions. Unfortunately, however, the voluntary approach proposed by the industry did not ensure a "common charger" as understood by the co-legislators;
2. The Commission has continuously monitored the situation on the market and is committed to meet the policy objectives of enhancing interoperability and consumer convenience, and reducing electronic waste;
3. Any legislative proposal will be proposed if supported by evidence. The Commission has already launched a study. Preliminary results of the study show that a combination of policy options will have to be carefully designed in order to achieve the expected objectives.

SPEECH

Introduction

Mr President,

Honourable Members,

I welcome this opportunity to explain what the Commission is doing on the common charger.

Let me first underline that the Commission has been strongly supporting harmonisation of chargers for mobile phones and similar devices.

The common charger campaign was an initiative triggered by the Commission already in 2009. Thanks to the Commission's efforts, industry implemented a voluntary approach. The work has only gained in importance since then. In the light of the urgent transition to a circular economy, a sustainable product policy is a priority initiative in the European Green Deal just adopted by this Commission.

Let me give a bit of background first. In 2009 there were more than 30 charging solutions. Currently there are only three main solutions.

The voluntary approach has therefore been very effective in reducing market fragmentation, enhancing consumer's convenience and reducing environmental impact, without resorting to regulation. It should be noted however that electronic waste is still one of the fastest growing waste streams, which makes this type of waste prevention particularly important.

This voluntary agreement came to an end in 2014.

Since then, the Commission has made many efforts to promote a

renewed voluntary commitment.

However, the last mile has not been accomplished yet.

The technological challenge

Since 2014, the same year the voluntary agreement was discontinued, industry has been introducing on the market two new technologies for charging: USB-C and wireless.

Fast-charging capabilities have been implemented in many models too.

In this context of technological changes, we felt that a voluntary approach, but actively supported by the Commission, was the best way of achieving our policy objectives without hampering innovation.

In the discussions with industry, we continuously insisted on the need to agree on a solution, which would satisfactorily fulfil the following objectives:

1. Consumer convenience;
2. Safety and interoperability of chargers; and
3. Reduction of electronic waste.

Regretfully, the Memorandum of Understanding of March 2018 fell short of our expectations. Industry proposed to continue allowing for proprietary solutions, instead of implementing one 'common charger'. Therefore, consumer convenience and reduction of e-waste was not enhanced. In addition, the scope was limited to smartphones only, failing to capture other portable devices.

The way forward

Against the global backdrop of ever increasing material use and resource extraction responsible for half of the total CO₂ emissions and environmental pressures, we considered this a missed opportunity. Therefore the Commission explored possible other options with a study to be published in the next days. One of the options is the adoption of a delegated act under the Radio Equipment Directive.

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At a first glance, regulating the common charging interface on its own would however not necessarily be an “optimal” solution. This would mainly consist in the elimination of proprietary connectors (representing around 20% of the market), with limited benefits for consumers.

For this option to achieve significant reduction in material use, e-waste, and greenhouse gas emissions it would have to be complemented by additional measures, for instance to mandate and/or incentivise the sale of mobile phones without the charger.

Therefore, we will look at a combination of policy options including regulatory and non-regulatory measures in order to achieve our objectives.

The study also assessed whether it is possible to extend the scope beyond smartphones and thus enhance the consumers and environmental benefits, taking account of technical issues such as the different power needs.

In addition, innovation and interoperability are key elements of any solution. Therefore any better performing new charging solution would be welcome, as long as it is a “common charging” solution.

Along the same lines, interoperability of wireless technology for

charging would have to be ensured, even if this is still an incipient technology.

And definitely consumers should be given a central role, in particular if manufacturers are only allowed to sell mobile phones without the charger, which seems to be a promising option from an environmental point of view. This would entail large consumers' awareness campaigns, and consumers should benefit from any reduction in costs being passed on through lower prices for stand-alone devices.

In the European Green Deal we have committed to support and accelerate the EU's industry transition to a sustainable model of inclusive growth. We have committed ourselves to mobilise industry for a clean and circular economy, including through a sustainable products' policy and the durable design of products, giving priority also to reducing and reusing materials before recycling them.

The Commission is therefore committed to present next steps to make common chargers a reality for all EU citizens and I will keep you closely informed.,

Conclusion

Honourable MEPs,

Let me reiterate that the European Commission has made many efforts to foster greater harmonisation and is committed to sustainable products, as an important priority of the European Green Deal.

Consumer convenience, reduction of electronic waste, safety and interoperability will be our guiding principles.

At the same time, industry can continue to innovate and bring more performant products on the market, for the benefit of consumers.

The preferred voluntary approach did not meet your expectations, did not meet consumers' and our own expectations.

It is never too late for industry to come up with a suitable proposal, but we now must consider the legislative approach. The Radio equipment directive is one option to take certain type of regulatory measures. But we intend also to analyse other options, including through ordinary legislative procedure, to ascertain whether a superior cost-benefit outcome could be achieved by pursuing them.

I hope that I can count on your support for this way forward.

Thank you.

Word count: +/- 900

Defensives / Q&A

1. The Commission reported that the draft Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) submitted by phone manufacturers to the Commission in March 2018- was not satisfactory. What is the status of the file? How is the Commission going to act?

The European Commission has invested a lot of efforts into this matter since 2009. Following expiration of the first Memorandum of Understanding, which proved effective in substantially reducing fragmentation of the market, the Commission encouraged the mobile phone industry to reach a new voluntary agreement. Regretfully, as you rightly point out, the new Memorandum of Understanding falls short of our expectations.

This is the reason why we are now assessing other options. To this end, we have carried out an impact assessment study in support of a possible regulatory option under the Radio Equipment Directive (Article 3(3)(a)), which empowers the Commission's to adopt a delegated act. Other regulatory options are also being evaluated, to support environmental aspects for instance. The objective of any future regulatory option would be to enhance consumers' convenience and reduce electronic waste, whilst at the same time allowing for future technological evolution. The scope would potentially be broader than smartphones and cover most of the medium-small electronic equipment. Any future regulatory option will, however, need to be based on strong evidence.

2. Why the Commission took time since expiration of the MoU?

The Commission's preferred approach was to encourage a voluntary solution by the manufacturers. The idea was to let the industry to propose the best possible technical solutions while not hampering

innovation. That collaborative spirit was the basis of the original MoU, which proved to be successful for both consumers and the industry, while guaranteeing reduction of e-waste. Other than facilitating consumers' life, it was estimated that the reduction from 30 to just 2 types of chargers resulted in a e-waste reduction of 51,000 tons per year. A lot of progresses have been done since then, and we now have only 3 chargers types, and one of them is being phased out. The Commission spent many efforts by continuing liaising with the mobile phone industry to push them to agree on a new voluntary agreement. Unfortunately, it is now clear that while the voluntary approach brought significant improvements in the market, it will not be able to accomplish the last mile and deliver a single common charging solution.

3. How does the Commission intend to tackle the technical evolution?

We are fully convinced of the need to come up with a future-proof solution, which would allow technological innovation in the sector. For this reason, the technical analysis we are carrying out has taken into account new developments such as fast charging and wireless charging. The analysis has particular focused on the identification of factors that could limit interoperability of devices using new charging solutions (which were not addressed by the proposed MoU of March 20018 at all) and/or prevent further innovation. We should point out, however, that wireless charging is not expected to replace cabled charging anytime soon.

Concerning traditional charging, we are looking at legislation, which would allow bringing to the market new more performant solutions, as long as any new solution is also a “common” one.

4. How are sustainability aspects taken into account?

Fighting e-waste is one of the major objectives of the initiative. According to the study, just harmonising the chargers interface will

not be that effective unless measures are also taken to favour decoupling, that is, reusing existing chargers instead of increasing their number. Given that, a combination of options, going beyond the empowerment provided by the Radio Equipment Directive, is being considered.

5. What are the next expected steps ?

The results of the study will be made public in the next weeks.

The study clearly indicates that it would be more cost-effective to tackle this issue in a wider way than just regulating the socket interface type.

This file has taken a multidisciplinary dimension. Given that, the Commission has already started working between the different involved services to consider a possible package of actions to achieve the desired policy objectives in the most cost-effective way.

6. What are the figures about possible reduction of e-waste?

Following first MoU, when 30 different types of chargers were on the market, it was estimated that 51,000 tons of electronic waste were generated per year in the EU.

Actually, though the situation appears to have slightly improved given the changed scenario with less types of chargers, there is still need for reducing e-waste. Especially taking into account the increased use of raw materials and the need to reduce CO2 emission footprint.

As an example, according to preliminary results of the study, improving decoupling alone could provide with e-waste savings of more than 10,000 tons per year.

7. What types of electronic devices could be included in the scope, other than mobile phones?

From a pure technical perspective, a wide range of devices, including tablets, e-readers, wearables, and even laptops could fall in the scope. However, cost implications and other specific requirements

must be taken into account. For instance, low value devices could become too expensive if they have to ship with a charger that is more sophisticated and/or powerful than required. In addition, for devices that operate in extreme environments USB Type-C connectors could not be appropriate.

The choice of targeted devices that could fall under the scope will have to take into account those constraints. In the recent years, we also assisted to a trend that makes smartphones integrating certain functionalities previously provided by other portable devices such as cameras, car navigators, etc., resulting in a reduction of their market share. In addition, there is an increasing trend of those devices being sold without charger, as it is assumed that users already own some used by smartphones. As such, benefits of an extension of scope might be lower than what one may expect. Without prejudging further needed assessment, devices which could very likely be in the scope of a new proposal are smartphones, tablets and other devices having similar technical requirements such as camera and e-books.